THE GO AHEAD BOYS AND THE MYSTERIOUS OLD HOUSE

By ROSS KAY

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THE GO AHEAD BOYS
AND THE
MYSTERIOUS OLD HOUSE

BY

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PREFACE

In almost every rural community in the older parts of our country there is a house which some of the country folk have believed to be "haunted." As a rule this house is old and perhaps has fallen into partial decay. The children passing on the country road move to the opposite side when they draw near the building. Stories are current of scenes which have been witnessed and sounds heard in the vacant dwelling. Perhaps even the older people have not altogether outgrown their feeling of timidity when they are near it. How baseless all such stories are and how easily most of the unusual sights and sounds can be accounted for is of course clearly understood. In this story I have tried to interest my young readers in the attempts of four normal, go-ahead boys to solve the mysteries connected with a venerable house near the home of one of them, which was shunned by many of the simple country people. I have endeavored to avoid all sensationalism and yet to interest the boys and girls in a stirring story of the experiences of my heroes. I am not without hope that the final solution of the mystery of the old Meeker House may help my young readers a

little more courageously to face other problems, perhaps equally mysterious or perplexing, which may be presented to them in other forms. At all events I sincerely hope that the spirit and determination of the Go Ahead Boys will remain in their minds after the story itself shall have long been forgotten.

Ross Kay.

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THE GO AHEAD BOYS AND THE MYSTERIOUS OLD HOUSE

CHAPTER I

THE OLD MEEKER HOUSE

"DO you see that house?"

"You mean that low, old house on the corner of the road?"

"Yes."

"What of it?"

"Well, that's one of the oldest houses in this part of the country."

"It looks the part. How old is it?"

"It's at least one hundred and seventy-five years old."

"It's old enough to look better, then. Is that one of the houses that Washington slept in?"

"I guess so."

"It must be, from the stories you have told me since I have been here. How old was Washington, anyway, when he died?"

"He was in his sixty-eighth year."

"I think there's some mistake about that."

"No, sir. Those are the correct figures. He was born in 1732 and he died in 1799."

"I'm not going to dispute you, George. I'll take your word for it, but it always seemed to me that Washington's age must have been a good deal greater than the histories say it was."

"Why?"

"Because he slept in so many houses. I have figured it up and if he had spent about a quarter of an hour in every one of the houses that you say he slept in, it will figure out that he was a good deal more than sixty-seven years old. Indeed, I have begun to think that Methuselah was an infant-in-arms compared with George Washington, if ten per cent of the stories you have been telling us are true. By the way, how old was Methuselah, anyway?"

"'And all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred and sixty and nine years and he died.'"

"Well, poor old man, I should have thought he would have been ready to die. Just think of it, having to live in this world almost a thousand years! I wonder how his hearing was and if he could see straight. I have always thought that no matter how long I might live I should want people to feel when I came to die that I had a little more of a record than born in 1899 and died some time in the future."

"That's the best thing some men ever did."

"What?"

"Why, to die. They'd give up their places to others who could fill them better."

"What's all that got to do with that old house?"

"Nothing. I didn't start to talk about Methuselah."

"That's all right, but what about this house?"

"It's haunted."

A hearty laugh went up from the three boys who were the companions of George Sanders in his automobile.

The conversation which has been recorded had been carried on by George Sanders and his friend Fred Button. These two boys, together with John Clemens and Grant Jones, were close friends and schoolmates. Although they were nearly of the same age they were markedly different in their appearance. Fred, who was the pygmy of the party, was a little, round-faced, bright-eyed fellow, who was able to say quick and keen things and who was the inspiration of most of the pranks of which the band was guilty.

John Clemens was perhaps Fred's closest friend. He was six feet three inches tall, but he did not weigh very much more than the shorter Fred, who made up in breadth what he lacked in length.

Grant Jones, the most quiet and thoughtful member of the party, seldom entered into the

wordy contests, although he took special delight in the pranks of his comrades.

George Washington Sanders was the owner of the automobile in which the four boys were riding.

The day was one of the most beautiful of early summer. In Northern New Jersey, not far from the border of New York State, George's father had an extensive farm. To this place from their early childhood the four friends had been accustomed to come from the great city and the many good times they had enjoyed there seemed to increase in number and quality with every succeeding summer.

Not all their summers had been passed on the farm, however. There had been frequent trips, which the boys had taken to different parts of their own land and others. A few years before this time they had been accompanied by the father or uncle of one of the boys, who had acted as guardian and guide. On these various trips they had not only had many enjoyable times, but also many stirring experiences. Some of these adventures have already been told in other stories of this series.

Among themselves the boys frequently referred to the quartet as the Go Ahead boys. They had selected this name as one that was most expressive of their purposes. They had found it in the famous motto of Davy Crockett, who, years ago,

was himself familiarly known as "Go Ahead" Crockett.

On the day when this story opens they were on their way to George's farm. They had approached within a mile of their destination when their host had called their attention to the low building which commonly was referred to as the Meeker House. It was an unpretentious structure, containing a story and a half, with a lean-to or addition, that looked much as if it had been built as an afterthought, or as a postscript is added to a letter.

The sides of the building were weather-beaten and it was manifest that it had been long since any one had dwelt in the house.

"It seems to me, George," spoke up Fred, "that you're finding new historical places around the farm every summer. Let me see, what was it last summer?"

"You are doing better, Fred," laughed George. "You remember now that there was a last summer. I have sometimes been afraid you wouldn't remember even that much, but for your sake I'll tell you that last summer I told you the story of the young fellow who was captured in Ramapo Pass. He was Washington's messenger, you will remember, although he did not know it at the time."

"I do recall now," said Fred pompously, "some information you were kind enough to dole out to

us. It seems to me that you told me that this young fellow was sent purposely by Washington down through the Ramapo Valley so that he would be captured by the British and taken to New York. If I'm correct he had a letter sewed inside the lining of his coat and this letter contained instructions for General Heath, who was at Morristown, to join him, that is Washington and not the boy, in taking New York."

"That's right. It all comes back to me, too," joined in Grant. "This fellow was taken to New York and he felt pretty mad at Washington. He could have found his way across the country all right, he thought, and would have given the message to General Heath without any trouble, but Washington insisted upon his going through to Ramapo Valley and of course he was caught. Poor chap, he didn't know that that was the very thing Washington was planning to do. He wanted him caught so that his letter would be found and Clinton wouldn't dare leave New York."

"What did Clinton want to leave New York for?" broke in John. "I can't understand why anybody would want to leave little, old New York. That's the best town on the globe."

"He wanted to take his army south to help Cornwallis, who was bottled up on the Yorktown peninsula. That was the trick that Washington played on him. He kept Clinton here, and when

at last Clinton got his eyes opened, he found out that Washington's army was already down across the Delaware and headed for Chesapeake Bay."

"Did he arrive in time?" inquired Fred innocently.

"For further and detailed information I refer you to any primary history of the United States," said Grant laughingly. "That's one of the things no American boy ought to have to learn. He ought to know it before he begins."

"What about this house back here?" said Fred. "You seem to point it out as if you thought there was something peculiar about it."

"I told you that it's haunted."

Again the boys laughed heartily as Grant said, "Anybody would think to hear you talk, George, that you belonged back in the days when they hanged witches."

"You mean burned," spoke up Fred promptly.

"No, I don't mean 'burned' the witches, I mean 'hanged,' " retorted Grant. "There are some ignorant people who sometimes talk about the people of the Salem Colony burning witches, but they didn't burn them—they hanged them."

"Pardon me," said Fred demurely. "I stand corrected."

"But there really is something queer about this house," said George. "I know, for I've been there."

The boys all looked back at the little building, which now was far behind them. The quiet that rested upon it seemed like that of a cemetery. It plainly belonged to another generation.

"What do you mean by its being haunted?" demanded Fred, at last breaking in upon the silence.

"I'm telling you what the common report is," said George, somewhat testily. "Everybody says it is haunted."

"But you said you yourself knew it was."

"No, I didn't. I said there was something peculiar about it."

"Go on with your story, George," called John. "Don't keep us in this burning suspense. What was it?"

"Why, I went over there one day," explained George, somewhat reluctantly. "It was just at sunset and a terrible thunder shower had come up and I ran to the old Meeker House to get in out of the rain."

"When did you learn to do that?" broke in Fred.

"I didn't have to learn," declared George. "At all events I got inside the house and waited for the storm to pass. But it didn't pass. When it struck the hills over yonder it was turned back by colder currents of air, so I got the storm coming and going. The first thing I knew the old place was dark and then—"

"And then what?" demanded Grant.

"And then,—things began to happen."

"What happened?" inquired Grant. "Don't keep us in this terrible suspense."

"Well, there wasn't a breath of air stirring," explained George, "but the window shutters began to slam a half a dozen times and I heard groans that seemed to come up from the cellar and I was almost sure that once I heard something or somebody call my name."

"That's a good one," laughed John, who in spite of his flippant manner was strongly moved by the story of his friend. "You're always expecting somebody to call you by name whether they know you or not."

"Oh, but they know *of* him," suggested Fred. "I know *of* a good many people that I don't know by sight; for example, there's the President."

"Keep still, fellows," ordered Grant, "and let George tell his story. He was as far as the slamming of the shutters and the groans that came from the cellar and the call which some of the evil spirits made on him by name. Go on, George," he added, turning to his friend, "tell us what happened next."

CHAPTER II

COWBOYS AND SKINNERS

"I DON'T know just what happened next," laughed George. "There were two peals of thunder so near together that you could hardly clap your hands between them. When the first one came and I heard that call, I didn't stand on the order of my departure. When the next clap sounded I was away down the road under that old oak tree."

All the four boys laughed heartily, even George apparently not being crestfallen by his lack of courage on the night he was describing.

"What is it you call the house?" inquired John.

"The Meeker House."

"You think it's haunted?"

"I didn't say so," responded George somewhat warmly. "I merely said it is a common report that it is a haunted house. I'm just telling you what happened one night when I ran in there to get out of a storm."

"Poor old house," said George thoughtfully, as he looked back at the old building, which still could be seen in the distance. "It makes me think

of Uncle Sim. He's the last leaf on the tree and I guess this is the oldest house in this part of the country."

Uncle Sim was an aged negro, who for many years had been in the employ of George's father. His labor was no longer efficient, but his faithful services in the years that were gone had caused Mr. Sanders to provide for the wants of the gray-haired negro. Uncle Sim's form was bowed with the weight of years which he carried and his trembling limbs showed how much he had suffered from the "mis'ry." Indeed, the boys had become convinced that there was no topic concerning which the old man loved to talk as he did concerning his various aches and pains.

In spite of his afflictions, however, Uncle Sim was a warm friend of the boys. When they got into mischief Uncle Sim's face was lifted heavenward so that he was unable to see any of the pranks they committed and therefore was unable to impart any information when he was asked as to his knowledge of their deeds. He was a great favorite of the boys and many of his stories had been familiar to them from their earliest childhood. He knew why the red-squirrel and the black hated each other so intensely. He was well informed concerning the perpetual warfare that existed between the dogs and cats on the farm. The call of the bluejays was in a language which

Uncle Sim claimed to understand. And although he did not talk back to the chattering jays, nevertheless he strongly believed that they were much more guarded in their conversations when he was nearby.

"You go ask Uncle Sim if the house is haunted," repeated George. "He'll tell you what he thinks and you won't have to wait very long for him to do it, either."

"Has he never been there?" asked Fred.

"You'd better ask him," declared George.

"What do you honestly think about it yourself, George?" said Grant more seriously.

"I don't know just what to think. I haven't been there since—"

"Since when?" spoke up John encouragingly.

"Since the last time I was there."

"When was that?"

"That time I was telling you about when I ran in there to get out of the rain."

"Will you go back there now if we'll go?" challenged Fred.

"I don't mind going," said George, "but I don't believe we'll have time this afternoon." His three companions laughed derisively and so aroused his spirit that he said brusquely, "That's all right, fellows. I'll go back there as soon as any one of you will go."

"All right, sir," called John. "Stop your

car, and we'll all of us go back to the old Meeker House and find out if what you have been telling us is true."

"Who ever heard," broke in Grant, "of ghosts walking around in the daytime? The time for us to go there is when the ghosts are showing up well."

"You didn't tell us, George, what the ghosts were?"

"No, I didn't see them," replied George.

"What do they say they are?"

"Why, the common report is, that ever since the days of the Revolution the ghosts of the Cowboys and Skinners have made their headquarters in the old Meeker House and whenever there's a night that is especially dark or there is a particularly heavy storm, then they come there and join in the racket."

"Cowboys?" demanded John. "What do you mean? Those fellows that drive the cattle out on the plains?"

"No, sir, I mean the men who lived in this part of the country when Washington was fighting for the independence of the United States. But even if they did live here they wouldn't help him. They said they didn't belong to either side, but the Cowboys usually took advantage of both sides. When the men were away from home they would go into a house, if they thought there was any

money hidden in some old stocking, and they would take the women and hold their feet out over the fire until they told where the money was."

"What were the Skinners?" inquired John.

"Why, they were about the same kind of men, the only difference being that the Cowboys took the families of the patriots, while the Skinners paid their first attention to the Tory families. I guess it didn't make much difference to either party as long as they found some money or could get any valuables."

"What did they put up with such things for?"

"They had to put up with more or less of it," answered George. "You see most of the men were away from home, fighting in the army. That gave the Cowboys and Skinners their chance and they took it. When the men came back the Cowboys and Skinners were gone."

"They were something like Georgie Porgie, weren't they?" laughed Grant. "I don't know who he was, but when a certain part of the population of which he was afraid began to get busy, Georgie Porgie ran away,—likewise the Cowboys and Skinners."

"It's all very interesting," spoke up Fred, "but I don't believe there's such a thing in all the world as a ghost."

"All right, sir," said George warmly. "All I want you to do is to talk to Uncle Sim and if he

doesn't convince you that the Meeker House is the special place where all the people that walk around in the night have their headquarters, then I'm mistaken."

"I'll ask him just as soon as we get back," said Fred promptly.

Not long afterward the automobile entered the beautiful grounds of the farm where the four boys were spending a part of the summer. The place was attractive because of its quietness and the deep shade in the front yard. A collie dog, lying on the ground, arose and stretched itself and then bounded toward George as soon as the boys alighted. Around the corner of the garage at that moment came Uncle Sim, his broad-brimmed hat carried in his hand and his face shining with perspiration and good nature.

"Well, Uncle Sim," called Fred. "You can't guess where we've been."

"No, suh, no, suh," replied the negro, "I reckon I can't. Mos' gen'lly I finds out right soon whar yo' boys has been. Sometimes I can tell the d'rection in which yo' all is goin', even when I can't see none o' yo'all."

"How's that?" demanded John.

"Why, from the d'rection in which all the dogs and cats and birds and cows and I reckon everything that's able to get away, is movin'."

The boys laughed heartily at Uncle Sim's state-

ment and Grant said, "But, Uncle Sim, you know we are the Go Ahead boys."

"Yas, suh. Yas, suh, I reckon I's somewhat familar with dat ar fac'."

"Uncle Sim, have you ever been in the Meeker House?" spoke up Grant abruptly.

For a moment the old negro was silent as he stared blankly at the boys. Shaking his head he said, "What fo' yo' ask me that question?"

"Because I want to know," said Grant.

"No, suh. I ain't never been inside the Meeker House, but I's been so close dat I could hear what was er goin' on."

"Why, what is going on there?" inquired Fred. "The house seemed to me to be deserted. Does any one live there?"

"No, suh. No, suh, no one lives dar. Leastwise, no one live dar in the daytime."

"Who lives there at night?" inquired Fred.

Once more the negro was silent and it was evident that the boy's question had aroused certain feelings in the heart of Uncle Sim.

"Yo' all better take my advice," said the old negro, shaking his head in a still more solemn manner. "Yo' better keep away from de Meeker House."

"Why?" inquired John.

"No good comes to anybody dat goes to the Meeker House in the night time."

"But how do you know, Uncle Sim? You say you have never been there?"

"Yo' all keep away from dar. Min' what I tell you. Don't none o' you' boys go near dat old Meeker House after sundown."

"But you make us want to go all the more," said Grant.

Uncle Sim merely shook his head and made no further comment. It was plain, however, that he was seriously troubled by the statement of Grant and that he was sincere in his warning.

"I say, fellows," called Fred quickly, "why don't we go over to the Meeker House to-night? It looks as if it is going to be cloudy," he added as he glanced up at the sky. "This will be just the ideal night. If there's anything uncanny around the place we'll be likely to find it out. Oh, you needn't go if you don't want to," he added quickly upon George's unspoken protest. "You and Uncle Sim will be excused, if you don't want to go."

"If you fellows go I'm not going to be left behind," spoke up George promptly.

"Then it's all fixed," declared Fred gleefully. "We'll go to the Meeker House to-night."

CHAPTER III

INTO THE HAUNTED HOUSE

THE Go Ahead boys were excited when they entered the house of their friend and that night when they gathered about the supper table their one theme of conversation was the proposed visit to the old Meeker House.

Occasionally throughout the conversation there was an expression on the face of George different from that of his companions. However, none of them was aware of the occasional smile, or of the keen look with which George occasionally glanced about the table. At other times the expression of his face was serious and his interest in the suggested visit apparently was as keen as that of any of his friends.

The boys decided to wait until darkness had fallen before they started on their expedition.

"It's just eight o'clock," said Grant, as they left the house and prepared to take their places in the automobile which was awaiting their coming.

"Eight o'clock and all's not well, I'm afraid," suggested Fred.

"Are you afraid?" demanded John with a laugh.

"No, I'm not afraid, but somehow when I think of this business," replied Fred, "I find I have some shivers."

"You had better not go, my lad," said John solemnly. "This is no place for infants or those afflicted with chills."

"I'm not chilly enough to stay home if all of you are going," retorted Fred.

"It's just the kind of a night we want," spoke up George. "There isn't any moon and it's going to be dark.

"Those clouds look as if it might rain," suggested Grant.

"That will be all the better," said George. "The darker the night the better the spooks behave. They say it's almost impossible to find any there on a moonlight night."

"I hope we'll find some to-night," laughed John, but his voice somehow seemed to belie his confidence.

At all events there was not much conversation in the automobile as it sped swiftly down the road.

George, who was driving, occasionally referred to the various stories he had heard of the deeds in the Meeker House, but his efforts did not meet with any marked response until he said, "I have

heard that Claudius Smith sometimes shows up in the old house."

"Who's he?"

"He *was* a Cowboy. He lived more than one hundred and twenty-five years ago. You have got to speak of him as one who 'was' and not 'is'."

"What makes him come back to the old house?"

"It was one of his favorite places, I'm told."

"What was he?"

"I told you he was a Cowboy. He got to acting so badly that at last all the farmers and their boys that could be spared from the army got together and chased him clear down on Long Island."

"Did they get him?" inquired Fred.

"They did. They brought him back and took him to Goshen, where they hanged him in the old courtyard."

"I shouldn't think he would come back here to the Meeker House," suggested Grant. "I should think his ghost would 'hang' around the court house up at Goshen."

"I can't tell you about that," said George, "but it may be that he follows the road he used to travel. That may be the reason why part of the time he's here at the old Meeker House."

"He must have been a great boy," suggested Fred.

"He certainly was, and he wasn't the only one.

I have heard my father tell about a man here in Jersey named Fagan. He was one of the Cowboys that they used to call the Pine Robbers."

"Who were they?" inquired John.

"Why there were a dozen or more bands of these Pine Robbers. They used to make their headquarters in the Pines back of Lakewood. They would dig a hole in the sand and hide in it the stuff they had stolen, and then, when they had enough to make up a cargo they would take it to Toms River and ship it to New York, where William Franklin helped them dispose of it."

"Who was William Franklin?" demanded Grant.

"Why, every educated man knows that William Franklin was the last royal governor of New Jersey. He was the son of old Ben Franklin. He inherited his father's brains, but not his father's disposition. He was one of the bitterest of all the Tories, and when the war of the Revolution broke out he went to New York to be with his friends."

"What happened to this man Fagan?" asked Fred. "Is his ghost around here, too?"

"I can't tell you," replied George, "whether it is here or not. I know Fagan got to be such a bad man stealing, shooting, tormenting the women and children that finally a big gang of men took after him and caught him down here between Trenton and Freehold."

"Did they do anything to him after they caught him?" inquired Grant.

"Not very much. They just hanged him from the limb of a big tree by the side of the road and left the body swinging there in the air for two or three days. Finally they left the head in the noose, stuck a long pipe between the jaws and my grandfather used to tell me that the head was there until the crows had picked out the eyes and left nothing but the grinning skull."

"That's a nice story to tell just before we make our bows at a spook party," said Fred.

The boy was striving to speak lightly, but his voice sounded strange even in his own ears. Indeed, by this time, after the gruesome stories of the Cowboys had been told, the nerves of all the boys were on edge.

The dim outlines of the Meeker House were now plainly visible. The silence that rested over the place was unbroken except for the sighing of the wind as it swept through the ancient pine trees that grew in the front yard.

"This is a ghost story up to date, isn't it?" said Grant. "I don't suppose many of those Cowboys or Skinners ever traveled around in automobiles."

"Probably not," said John dryly, and conversation abruptly ceased.

"George, don't you think you had better leave

your automobile up here on the road and not take it clear down to the house?" inquired Fred in a whisper, when they drew near the place they were seeking.

"What for?" inquired George.

"Oh, nothing, only I thought it would be more out of the way there. You see the house is on the corner and if some one makes a sharp turn there they might run into it without seeing it."

"Just as you say," replied George good-naturedly.

Acting upon the suggestion, the automobile was stopped about a hundred yards from the house and the boys at once prepared to walk across the yard toward the front door.

No one spoke until Fred whispered sharply, "What's that?"

"What's what?" retorted George, also speaking in a whisper.

"Nothing but a branch creaking up in the tree," suggested Grant.

"I guess that's what it was," assented Fred, and the four boys at once resumed their advance upon the ancient house.

"Come on, fellows," whispered George. "We'll try the front door first."

The attempts of the boys, however, to open the door were unavailing. The door was massive and although it creaked and groaned it was strong

and all the attempts to open it proved failures.

"You stay here, fellows," whispered George. "I'll go around to the back of the house and see if I can get in there."

"I'll go with you," suggested Fred.

"No, you won't, you'll stay right here and defend these fellows who are a good deal more scared than they are willing to own," retorted George.

The trio remained in silence before the front door, waiting for some word from their friend, who at once had carried out his suggested plan and had gone to the rear of the house.

Suddenly and without any word being spoken the heavy door in front of the waiting boys slowly opened. It creaked noisily but there was no question that George succeeded and the door was being opened from within.

Grant was the first to enter, but instantly he stepped back and in a voice that trembled said quickly, "What's that? What's that?"

There was a noise of flying wings in the room before them, but not one of the boys was able to see any of the winged creatures. Back and forth they flew, the unseen birds, their wings noisily flapping and their cries steadily increasing in volume.

Startled as all the boys were by the unexpected sound they withdrew to the porch in front of the

door and in whispers talked over the best plan for them to follow.

"I say we go ahead," said Grant at last. "We don't want to be scared out by a little thing like this."

"That's all right," agreed Fred. "You're so bold, I'll let you go ahead. I shall be satisfied tonight to be one of the go behind boys. I'm not afraid," he hastily added when Grant laughed derisively. "I'll follow you wherever you dare lead. Now then start if you want to."

No more was said and slowly and silently the boys once more entered the room into which the door directly opened.

This time again when only a few steps had been taken, by a common impulse they stopped and Fred whispered, "Where is George?"

"He's somewhere around here," whispered Grant in reply.

"But I don't see him or hear him," declared Fred. "We ought to find out what has happened."

"Oh, he's all right," said John confidently. "Come on, let's go ahead."

"We haven't any light," suggested Fred.

"We'll have one pretty soon. That's probably what George has gone for," whispered John. "He'll be back in a minute."

"I don't believe we had better try to go any

farther. A good many of these old houses have steps from one room to another. I don't want Fred to fall and break his neck."

"Don't you worry about my—" began Fred, but he stopped abruptly when suddenly the shutters in the room directly over their head banged noisily against the side of the house. At the same time the sound of the flying creatures in the room was heard again and as if to make matters worse a sound very like a groan came from the stairway. The weird interruption was followed by a wild laugh that came from the same stairway and a moment later the confusion was increased by a sound more unexpected than any which as yet had been heard by the Go Ahead boys in the old Meeker House.

CHAPTER IV

FLIGHT

THERE had been a moment of intense silence which was sharply broken by a long whistling sound, that seemed to come from some place directly behind the spot where the boys were standing. This sound was followed by a prolonged sigh and this in turn was abruptly ended when out of the darkness there came a call, "F-r-e-d! Fred Button!" The call was in a low tone but coming as it did after the startling events which had occurred was almost more than Fred was able to bear. His nerves were unstrung and without a word he turned and swiftly made for the door, which fortunately had been left open.

Nor had Fred been long out of the house before he was joined by his companions. George, who previously had gone around to the rear door, came as quickly as John and Grant.

For a brief time the boys assembled under the branches of a huge cherry tree that was growing in one corner of the yard.

"What do you make of that?" demanded

George. "I told you you might hear something about Fagan and the Cowboys if you went into that old Meeker House."

"It wasn't what I heard about them that troubled me," retorted Fred. "It was when I heard my own name called."

"Honest?" demanded George.

"Yes, sir. You ask the other fellows. Somebody right behind me called 'Fred.' 'Fred Button.' I was standing where I could see straight through the window and I am perfectly sure there wasn't anybody there. If you'll tell me how the thing was done I'll be much obliged to you."

"It wasn't done at all," laughed George. "You were just dreaming. It's one of those attacks of nightmare that you have some times. Don't you remember when we were at Mackinac,* how one night we had to throw some cold water in your face to make you wake up?"

"I guess that was the same night," retorted Fred, "when I had to administer condign and physical chastisement to you, you were kicking so in the bed."

"Yes, I have a very vivid recollection of that part of that night."

"Almost as vivid as you have of to-night," laughed George.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," said Fred

* See "The Go Ahead Boys on Smugglers' Island."

sharply. "You ask the other fellows if somebody didn't call my name."

"It did sound like it," said John, "but then we were ready to believe almost anything and when Fred said there was somebody calling him we all heard 'Fred' on every side of us. What are we doing out here, anyway? Why don't we go back there and look into it?"

"I'm going to look into it," said Fred quickly, "but I'm not going to look when I can't see. It's so dark to-night that you can't find anything."

"You seem to have found some things that made you leave the room faster than George goes when he runs the hundred in ten flat."

"Maybe I did," admitted Fred, "but if I did I want to tell you I never ran a race in which I was so hard pushed as I was to-night. There wasn't room to put a sheet of paper between Grant and me."

"That's all right," spoke up Grant. "I didn't take any part in your foolish conversation, but what I want to know is how you can account for these things."

"If you ask me," said George, "I'm not accounting for them."

"But there's some way to find out what these things mean. There isn't one of us a big enough fool to believe that there is such a thing as a ghost and yet we got into the old Meeker House,—"

"If there isn't any ghost," spoke up George, "then I don't see where the trouble is. You can't be afraid of something that isn't, can you?"

"I don't suppose you can," admitted Grant, "but sometimes you can be afraid of things you think are when they are not."

"You're getting too deep for me," said Fred. "What I want to know is about those wings. That room seemed to be just full of something that was flying all around."

"I'll tell you what it was," spoke up John.

"What was it?" inquired Fred quickly.

"Cherubs."

"What?"

"Cherubs. Don't you know what cherubs are? They are just heads with wings. You can find them on old tomb-stones and in the pictures of some of the old books. I have always thought that a cherub must be almost as happy as the people said he used to be. He didn't have to bother about any clothes except neckties and a hat. It doesn't take him very long to get from one place to another. In fact I think if Fred here was a cherub he would have had less trouble getting out of that house to-night than he did."

"You seem to be greatly troubled about my leaving that house," spoke up Fred testily. "I noticed that I wasn't alone."

"Except when you started," suggested Grant.

"We thought you were in trouble and came out to see if we could help."

"You did?" laughed Fred derisively. "I'll tell you what I'll do, Grant, if you'll go back into that house with me right now I'll go too."

"I'm going back there," said Grant slowly, "but as has been said I am going back when I can see something."

"That's what I thought," retorted Fred tauntingly.

"It's all right, fellows," spoke up George. "I guess we have had enough for one night. I don't suppose there really is anything in the things we have heard to-night, and we'll find out pretty soon just what it is, but until we do I think it's great fun to go into the old house and stir up the spooks."

"Do you know, I have an idea what those flying creatures were?" suggested John.

"What were they?" inquired George.

"Bats probably."

"Bats?" exclaimed Fred scornfully. "Bats? Why those things had wings at least two feet long. You could hear them flapping over your head."

"That's about on the scale that you heard and saw everything to-night, Fred. That is, everything except the length of the steps you took when you were leaving. I would like to understand how a

fellow who is only five feet four can take steps that are ten feet long."

"There's only one answer to that," said George, "and that is, he didn't."

"You don't know what you're talking about," retorted Grant. "You didn't see him. I did."

"See me?" exclaimed Fred. "See me! Why his hands were right on my shoulder all the while. I couldn't shake him off. He almost had me there two or three times. I'm not sure that I wouldn't rather have Fagan's spook get hold of me than Grant's hands when he is as scared as he was to-night."

"Well, fellows, what shall we do?" inquired George. "Do you want to give it up or go back?"

"Both," said Fred quickly. "We're not going back again to-night and we're not going to give it up. We're going ahead and find out what there is in that tomfoolery."

"Well, I see you have a little piece of nerve left yet," laughed George. "I told you what was coming but you wouldn't believe me."

"Was that the reason why you went outside, George?" demanded John. "You remember, fellows," he added, turning to his companions, "George went around to the back of the old house. He was outside where he could get a fine running start if he had to."

"That may all be," said George slowly, "but

my running start wasn't much compared with the one you fellows had. If you didn't get a running start I am wondering what time you would make if you had one. My, what a thing it would be at the track meet to have one of these ghosts to start the fellows off. I think the next time I see Grant on the track I'll yell Fagan at him. I think he will break the record if I do. Especially if Fred is just ahead of him. If you're not going back into the house," he continued, "I think we had better go back to the machine and start for home."

The boys all agreed and soon were seated in the car, riding swiftly back toward the farm.

Their confidence returned in proportion to the distance that intervened between them and the house which they had just visited. Indeed, when at last they arrived at the farmhouse every one was loud in his declaration that he had not been frightened by what had occurred and was strong in his determination to go back and investigate the things which had seemed so mysterious.

Nevertheless, in spite of their boasting, it was plain that Fred was somewhat chagrined by the quickness and rapidity of his departure from the old Meeker House. Several times that evening a sly allusion to his speed brought a quick retort.

The following morning, however, the courage and good spirits of the boys had returned in full measure. Even Fred was not afraid to acknowl-

edge his fear of the night before and laughed as heartily as any of his friends when they described his antics in his flight from the house.

"That doesn't make any difference," he asserted strongly. "I'm still one of the Go Ahead boys and I haven't given up the plan I spoke about."

"What's your plan, Freddie?" laughed John.

"I'm going to look into the old house by daylight."

"I wouldn't do that yet," suggested George soberly. "It seems to me the best plan will be for us to go down there again to-night and find out whether or not there really is anything in what we thought we heard and saw last night."

"We might take a gun," suggested Grant.

"What would you shoot?" said Fred scornfully. "Suppose you did find a spook and shot it, what good would it do? I suppose they aren't like other people."

After a long consultation it finally was agreed that another visit to the mysterious house should be made that evening and then if anything strange occurred the boys would make further investigation the following day.

CHAPTER V

A SURPRISE

MEANWHILE Fred had decided that he would make some investigations of his own. His apparent lack of courage had reacted now and he was determined to do something which would enable him to redeem himself in the eyes of his companions.

Accordingly when his friends decided early in the afternoon that they would take the automobile and go to the country club for a game of tennis he excused himself on the plea that there were some other and very important matters to which he must attend.

It was a matter of self-denial for Fred to decline to join his companions in a visit to the country club. This place throughout the summer afternoons was one that was marked in the region. Crowds of young people assembled there and the tennis courts and golf links were occupied by people who were finding their vacation days passing all too rapidly in the beautiful region.

To the protests of his friends Fred refused to listen. Even the fact that his absence might pre-

vent a game of tennis from being played did not appeal to him. He quietly and steadfastly adhered to his purpose.

Soon after luncheon he saw his friends depart, although the last words he heard were their calls for him to reconsider and join them.

Previous to their departure George called Fred into the library and in a low voice said to him, "Take my advice, lad, and don't try it."

"Don't try what?" Fred inquired.

"You know what I mean."

"I haven't the least idea."

"Well, then I tell you again that my advice to you is not to do it."

"But I don't know what you mean."

"If you'll think it over for two or three hours I'm sure you'll find out," declared George and he withdrew from the room.

George's warning was still fresh in Fred's mind when the boys no longer could be seen. He was still mystified by the strange warning. He was positive that he had not spoken to any of his friends concerning the project in his mind and therefore it was impossible that George could have heard any word of his plans.

Assured that his companions had departed, Fred soon afterward set forth on his solitary expedition. He had, however, not entered the road before he saw the automobile returning.

"What's wrong?" he called as the car stopped in front of the long, winding driveway that led to the farmhouse, which was located back on the hillside.

"I went off without my tennis racquet," explained George. "You have decided to come with us, haven't you, Fred?

"No, I'm not going," replied Fred.

"But you're going somewhere," said George. "What are you doing down here in the road if you're not? I thought you had some very important matters which you had to attend to this afternoon?"

"I have," and Fred refused to listen to the renewed pleadings of his friend, although he did not start on his way to the old Meeker House until once more the automobile had passed out of sight. He was suspicious as he walked on that George's return for the racquet had been a pretense on his part. He was somewhat suspicious now that George believed he was about to go back to the old house, although what had given him that impression it was impossible for him to say.

On his journey Fred had taken with him the collie dog which belonged to George. The animal was unusually beautiful and its owner was exceedingly proud of it, as it had won a prize whenever he had exhibited it.

Delighted to be permitted to accompany Fred

the intelligent animal expressed his pleasure in his own noisy and active manner.

It was not until Fred at last had arrived at the road in front of the old house that the collie displayed any uneasiness. When Fred turned in at the open gateway the dog, looking up into his face whined, and then apparently convinced that protests on his part were unavailing, turned and ran from the place.

Startled by the unexpected action Fred returned to the road and watched the dog as it fled swiftly homeward. A feeling of uneasiness crept over him despite his attempt to laugh. It was impossible for spooks to be found, he assured himself, on such a day. The afternoon sun, warm, and yet not unduly warm, was flooding the beautiful region with its beams. The fertile land, the attractive houses, even the woods back upon the hillside all seemed to be sharing in the absolute quiet that prevailed. Not a sound was to be heard save the noisy flights of the winged grasshoppers or the occasional unmusical sound which proclaimed the presence of locusts.

Determined to ignore the momentary impression which the unwillingness of the dog to accompany him into the old house had aroused, Fred once more turned toward the rear of the old building. A fallen grape-arbor on his right and the tangled mass of vines that grew along the ground showed

how long it had been since the place had received any attention. There was an air of neglect and decay manifest wherever he looked. The passing boys had thrown stones or snowballs at the windows until only a few panes were left. The chimneys had crumbled in part, so that not one was standing in its original form. The grass was high and tangled and the shrubs in the yard were rank and overgrown. The place which manifestly at one time had been the abode of people who had given it every care and affection had now been forgotten.

And yet, was it really forgotten? Fred vividly recalled the experience of the preceding evening as he advanced toward the kitchen door. The door still was hanging upon its hinges and was only partly closed. Doubtless it had been left ajar by George in his exit the night before.

Fred stepped cautiously inside the building. The silence that followed for a time was unbroken. The very stillness itself produced its effect upon the boy and when he stopped and looked intently all about him, his heart was beating rapidly, although he assured himself there was no cause for fear.

Suddenly from the front room came a sound that was unusual and somewhat startling in the prevailing stillness. It was a sound not unlike that produced by a noisy rattler in the hands of a

small boy. The noise, however, was forgotten, when, to Fred's intense amazement, which included perhaps an element of alarm, he was startled by the sound of footsteps on the stairway.

Once more he assured himself that it was broad daylight. Again he recalled the statement which he had heard many a time that in such houses there was nothing to be feared except after the shades of night had fallen. He could plainly see the rays of the afternoon sun as they entered through the open window and fell across the floor of the room in which he was standing.

But the footsteps could not be denied. The sound became plainer. For an instant Fred glanced timidly toward the door and was strongly tempted to run from the place.

Before he started, however, the footsteps ceased, the old door at the foot of the stairway creaked upon its hinges and a moment later Fred saw standing before him a man, whose appearance proclaimed him to be a tramp.

The surprise was mutual, and for a moment the man and the boy stared blankly at each other. Fred suspected that the stranger doubtless had been sleeping in the upper room. Indeed the boy laughed in his relief as he was confident now that he had discovered the source of the strange sounds that had been heard the preceding evening.

"Hello, young man," called the tramp in a low,

guttural voice. "Did you come in here to wake me up? I told me valet not to call me until five o'clock."

"No, I didn't come in here to wake you up," said Fred quietly.

"Maybe you come from the hospital?"

"No," said Fred simply.

"I'm expecting somebody from the hospital."

"What's the matter? Are you sick?"

"Yes, I be. Leastwise, I've got some symptoms I don't like."

"Tell me what the trouble is," suggested Fred goodnaturedly. "Perhaps I can help you."

"From the best I can find out I think I am threatened with hydrostatic internal spontaneous combustion."

"It's more likely your conscience," laughed Fred.

"No, it isn't my conscience. I can stick a pin in that and not flinch. No, it's something else that's the matter with me. I feel as if I were burning up inside."

"You're not going to get anything out of me," laughed Fred, "to put out the fire."

"That's a pity," said the tramp, who now seated himself quietly on the foot of the stairs. "That's a pity. All I need is a nickel to stop that roaring flame. I'm suffering from another trouble too," added the tramp.

"What's that?"

"Overweariness of the flesh. I've had that for considerable time. It's a great source of suffering. Still, I don't know that either of those is quite as bad as something else."

"What, have you got more troubles still?"

"Yes, I have."

"What are they?"

"Well, the chief one is that I'm an orphan. There isn't any home waiting for little Willie." The man shook his head in mock pathos and Fred laughed heartily. "I have consulted specialists," began the tramp once more, "but I don't find any one to relieve me. The last man I went to said he thought the best thing he could prescribe would be for me to go out in the country where I could breathe fresh air and not have to endure hard labor."

"What were you doing, breaking stone?" laughed Fred.

For a moment the tramp glared upon the lad, but a moment later he said goodnaturedly, "If I thought you knew what that meant I would give you something to make you remember this visit a long time. No, my great trouble is that I'm too ardent an American. I insist upon seeing my own country. I have been going to and fro, wandering up and down the land —"

"You're not the only one," broke in Fred. "It

seems to me I've heard about another individual who is going about like a roaring lion."

"Why don't you come in and sit down," suggested the tramp, apparently ignoring Fred's last suggestion. "Ever been in this old house before?"

"Once."

"When was that?"

"Last night."

"How long did you stay?"

"I don't remember. We left in such a hurry," said Fred somewhat ruefully.

"Oh, you found the spooks, did you?"

"We heard some strange noises. The strangest of all was that some one called my name."

"Oh, that's not strange," declared the tramp lightly. "I've been in this house hundreds of times. I have heard my name called and never flinched once. Sometimes the constable calls it and sometimes somebody else, but it doesn't make any difference; I never answer. If you'd like to look through the old house I'll show you around."

CHAPTER VI

A PRISONER

"THAT'S just what I should like to do," exclaimed Fred eagerly.

The knowledge that he was not to make the investigation entirely alone doubtless strengthened the courage of the boy. All his friends were aware that he was not cowardly and yet somehow his strange experience of the preceding evening in the old Meeker House had deeply affected him. Convinced as he was that there was an explanation to be found for every mysterious happening, nevertheless he was somewhat nervous at the thought of being alone in the neglected building.

"I have spent some time in here," said the tramp, "as I told you. It is a queer old house. For example, right here in this room," he added as he led the way into the front room, "there is a concealed closet. I don't think any one would ever find it unless he was told of it."

As he spoke the strange man turned a button, which was apparently a part of the molding of the stairway.

In response to his quick and energetic pull a door was opened and as Fred peered within he saw there was a small room perhaps six or seven feet square. It was directly under the stairway and when he looked into the adjoining room he saw that it extended within that room also.

"What was that for?" he said as he turned to his companion.

"I don't know," replied the tramp. "I suspect, though, that that is where they used to put the boys when they were naughty."

The tone of the man's voice, the language which he used; indeed the very bearing of the stranger, increased Fred's curiosity concerning him. Was this man no more than he appeared to be? Was he really a tramp, as he said he was? His clothing was old and worn, the care of his person had been neglected and at first glance any observer might think that he was an ordinary vagabond. Perhaps he was, Fred thought, and yet somehow he was convinced that there were other things to be explained in connection with the stranger.

"Come up stairs," said the tramp, leading the way up the stairway.

Fred followed obediently and soon found himself in the hallway from which opened several rooms. Some of these were large, though all were low. For a moment, as he stopped to look about him, it seemed to Fred that he almost saw the

sights that the house had witnessed one hundred years before this time. What stories of life and death, of suffering and joy these old rooms might have told had they been endowed with the power of speech.

Somehow, although Fred was unable to account for his feeling, it seemed that unseen witnesses were about him and that the presence of himself and the tramp in these rooms was very like an intrusion. He did not speak concerning his feelings, however, and after a hasty inspection the two returned to the room below.

"What's that?" demanded Fred suddenly as from the chimney there came sounds like those which he had heard the preceding evening.

"I cannot see," replied the tramp, his eyes twinkling as he spoke.

"I cannot see, either," said Fred, "but I can hear. Don't you know what that noise is?" As he spoke the strange sound was repeated. It was a broken note, sharp and yet long-drawn out. It was clearly heard, too, and yet Fred was convinced now that it was no ghostly voice from which the chatter came. But what was it? His companion did not explain to him and he himself had no conception of the source of the strange sound.

They proceeded through the various rooms on the first floor, but nothing was discovered that in

any way explained the mysterious events which Fred had come to investigate.

Conversation had almost ceased, the tramp seldom speaking except to call to Fred to follow him, and Fred only occasionally asking such questions as occurred to him.

"The cellar is the strangest part of all," said the tramp. "You don't want to leave until you have seen that part of the old house."

"All right," declared Fred lightly. "I came over to see what I could find, and if there's anything in the cellar worth finding I want to see it."

The stairs to the cellar were low and broad, but the wood in places had decayed and fallen away. As a consequence when the tramp descended upon the third step the rotten timbers in part gave way and he was compelled to leap to the ground below him. Fred too jumped, but the mishap did not cause any inconvenience, though neither of them spoke when both arose.

The light was dim, entering the place from two open windows which were just above the ground. In silence the investigators moved about the place until at last Fred said, "It seems to me like a dungeon down here. I don't know what they could have kept here."

"Probably they used to come down here with a candle. I have an idea that if you boys thought you saw and heard strange things here last night

you were not unlike the boys of one hundred years ago who came down here after apples and potatoes."

"That's right," laughed Fred, although his laughter was not hearty. "No man could crawl through either of those two windows. There isn't much more than room enough to put your arm through either of them."

"Wait a minute," said the tramp abruptly. "I'll be back here with a light. I want to show you something."

"What is it?" demanded Fred.

"Why, there's a well here in one corner. I don't know whether it was made in case the Meekers were attacked by the Indians and they wanted to be sure of having what water they needed, or whether the house was built over the old well, which they perhaps filled in and since then it has fallen away."

"Never mind," called Fred. "I'll go upstairs with you. I don't care anything about the old well."

"But I want to show it to you," declared the tramp. "You wait here and I'll be back in a minute."

Hastily the strange man retraced his way to the room above, but no sooner had he gained the place he was seeking than the massive door was dropped

into place and left Fred in almost complete darkness.

The first feeling of the boy was that some accident had befallen his recent companion. He listened intently, but he did not hear any sound that indicated any trouble in the room above.

Following this feeling of fear came the sensation of intense loneliness. Although the room was only dimly lighted, by this time Fred's eyes had become somewhat accustomed to the semi-darkness and he was able to see all about him. A pile of boards in one corner of the cellar were the only objects he distinguished.

At first Fred had no feeling of fear. He expected the door to be opened at once and he waited confidently for a hail from the man who had just left him. However, when several minutes elapsed and he heard no call nor was any attempt made to open the door, a feeling of alarm swept over him. Again he glanced hastily about the cellar and keenly watched the light of the setting sun as its beams were cast through the little windows.

Convinced that night was near at hand and somewhat alarmed now at his predicament, Fred rushed to the heavy door and did his utmost to lift it. Whether or not the door was fastened he did not know, but his efforts were unavailing. The massive door was unmoved and when a few minutes

had elapsed Fred was convinced that he was helpless to lift it.

Astonished by what he had already learned, he remained standing at the foot of the stairway and in his loudest tones called to the man who had recently left him. "Open the door! Open the door!" he shouted. "I can't get out. The door is fast."

His tones increased in loudness as he discovered that no attention was paid his hail.

Repeatedly the anxious lad pounded upon the cellar-door and repeated his calls. The silence that rested over the old house was unbroken. Apparently no one was within hailing distance. What had become of the tramp was not clear, but apparently he had departed from the old Meeker House.

Almost desperate now, Fred dragged the boards from the corner in which he had discovered them and piling them up on the floor beneath the little window that opened upon the road he soon was able to look out upon the scene. No one was within sight. To call for help now would be useless, if the tramp really had departed from the house.

He carefully examined the windows to see if it would be possible for him to lift the sash and thus make an opening that would be large enough to

enable him to crawl through. He was unable, however, to accomplish his task and soon concluded that his sole reliance now was to wait until some one passed in the road and call to him for help.

Not many minutes had passed before a farm-wagon, drawn by two horses, was seen approaching. The farmer who was driving the team was apparently unaware of any call upon him, for his rattling wagon soon passed on and in spite of Fred's loudest calls for help he did not stop.

"I don't believe I am making enough noise," Fred sturdily declared to himself. "The next one that passes I'll make him hear me whether he wants to or not."

A brief time afterward he discovered a boy driving a cow not far away on the road. He was approaching the corner on which the old Meeker House stood and in a brief time would be within hailing distance.

Convinced that his call before had not been heard because he had not used tones sufficiently loud, Fred increased his efforts. He shouted in tones that were unnatural, they were so high keyed. He then whistled and gave his school yell as being likely to be heeded when his own call might be unheard.

Nor were his efforts in vain. Fred saw the boy when he approached the corner stop abruptly and

give one startled look toward the old house. A moment later Fred saw a picture which he never was able to forget. The cow, with tail elevated, was running swiftly from the place, while close behind her followed the boy, who at frequent intervals stopped and looked behind him at the old Meeker House. It was evident to Fred what thoughts were in the mind of the lad, for his frequent glances, as well as his manner, betrayed his terror. Evidently he had heard stories of the old place that had not induced him to enter the building when such strange and unearthly sounds issued from the cellar.

A moment later the horn of an automobile was heard and soon afterward a car turned the corner. Fred was nearly hopeless by this time, but in desperation once more he did his utmost to make his voice heard. The automobile, however, passed on and apparently his calls for aid were unheard.

Darkness would be settling over the land within a few minutes. Fred thought of his friends, who doubtless by this time had returned from the country-club and were puzzled to account for the absence of their friend.

Convinced that he was the only one except the tramp who knew where he was at that time, Fred resolutely prepared to endure the wait that must elapse before relief could be had. As he turned away from the window he was startled by sounds

that came from the room directly above him. The boy, alarmed now and thoroughly distressed, stopped abruptly and waited for a repetition of the noise which had aroused him.

CHAPTER VII

AN ESCAPE

THERE was no question about the repetition of the strange sound in the upper room. To the excited boy there were evidences that people were walking over the board floors. Indeed, he was positive he could hear the slow, measured footfalls of some one who was walking back and forth in the room directly above him. A moment later he was equally convinced that the sound of the whistling creatures which had been heard when the four boys first visited the house was now repeated.

A moment later there came a rushing sound of many wings. For a moment Fred's courage almost deserted him, his flesh seemed to creep. He stopped abruptly in the darkness and spoke aloud to himself, "This will never do. It is all foolishness. There isn't any such thing as a spook anyway, so why should you be afraid of one?"

At that moment, however, the sound of the rushing wings was heard again and all Fred's efforts to strengthen his heart proved unavailing. The flying creatures were in the cellar, there was no

question about that now. Fred almost cried aloud as he heard the wings coming closer to the place he was standing.

A moment later the flying creatures seemed to be circling the cellar and in the midst of it all the sharp twitter which had so strangely impressed him the preceding evening was now heard again and within a few feet of him. Then, too, there was the sound of some one walking again in the room above him. Had Fred been in a less nervous condition he would have been aware that it was no ghostly walk which he heard, for the footfalls were heavy and plainly those of some one whose weight was not slight. Fred, however, was in no condition calmly to consider these things. The darkness was almost appalling now and surrounded as he was by unseen winged creatures his fears redoubled.

He looked again at the cellar windows, but escape through them was impossible. Almost in a frenzy the frightened boy decided that help must be found from some source. In his desperation he ran to the cellar door and pushed against it with all his strength. To his amazement the door readily yielded to his onslaught. He pushed up the heavy door and in a moment he was in the yard.

He was in the kitchen when the door once more fell back into its place. The loud report startled the unseen creatures and even after he had gained

the ground outside the building he heard the strange twittering that seemed now to come from the chimney. The noise made by the wings of the flying creatures also was plainly heard. Whatever the explanation might be the whole place and experience seemed so uncanny to the nervous boy that he instantly fled toward the road not far away.

Even when he gained the highway his one supreme thought still was of flight. Instantly beginning to run he steadily increased the pace at which he was fleeing until his breathing became labored and perspiration was pouring down his face. Occasionally he glanced behind him in his mad flight and on one occasion as he did so his foot was caught in some obstruction and he was thrown heavily upon the ground.

Falling, however, was not uncommon in the experience of Fred. Indeed, his friends declared that he was like a rubber ball, he bounced up after every fall as if the contact with the ground had only afforded him additional power.

The road was dusty and as Fred's flight continued his appearance became steadily worse. Fortunately, however, in the dim light not one of the few people who met him recognized him, or discovered his plight. The one great purpose in his mind was still to run. The greatest possible distance between himself and the old Meeker House

must be made and in his determination this distance steadily and rapidly increased. Occasionally he glanced behind the trees, the dim outlines of which were plainly to be seen. Somehow there was a fear in his mind that some enemy might be loitering behind these shelters. Once when he ran past an old and deserted barn that stood near the roadway he was confident that he heard sounds of weird laughter issuing from the tumbling structure. Indeed, in whichever direction the boy looked, it seemed to him he discovered evidences of the very enemies whom he had left behind him in his flight.

Somehow at last Fred found himself in the long, shaded lane or driveway that led from the road up to the house of his friend. The trees were tall poplars and stood like sentinels guarding each side of the road. Even now Fred's fears had not disappeared, although he saw the lights gleam from the windows of the old farmhouse before him.

So weary was he by his long flight and worn by his excitement that when at last he swiftly mounted the steps of the piazza his foot slipped and once more the unfortunate boy fell upon the floor.

Aroused by the sound his three friends instantly rushed from the room in which they were seated and a moment later discovered their friend in his predicament.

"What in the world is the matter with you?" demanded George as the three boys gazed in astonishment at Fred.

"N-n-o-t-h-in'. N-n-o-t-h-in'," gasped Fred.

"You look as if there was nothing doing," said Grant, repressing a smile as the plight of Fred became manifest in the light. "Actually you look as if you belonged in a lunatic asylum."

"I guess I do," responded Fred.

"Well, what's the matter?" demanded John. "You haven't told us where you have been nor what you have been doing."

"I can't. I can't now," said Fred. "Give me a chance to rest up."

"You need a bath more than you need a rest," declared George laughingly, as he became convinced that nothing serious had happened to his friend. "Come upstairs and I'll see that you get what you deserve."

"It's lucky everybody doesn't get what he deserves. If he did —"

"Never mind that," directed George. "Come on upstairs and take your bath and get a change of clothes and you'll feel in your right mind once more."

Acting promptly upon the suggestion Fred withdrew from his friends for a time and a half-hour later, when he returned to the piazza, he was not able entirely to conceal his feeling of chagrin.

It was true that he had had some strange experiences, but it was difficult now to believe that they were all real. Certainly his companions were very much in evidence and as they seated themselves, George said promptly, "Now my lad, tell us what happened to you."

"Well, I don't mind telling you," said Fred, "that I went over to the old Meeker House."

"That's just what I thought," laughed George, "and you stayed there until it was so dark that you heard those strange noises again, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir, I did that, and a good deal more."

"What else? Tell us about it. Why don't you talk?" demanded John impatiently.

"It isn't anything I want to talk much about," said Fred positively in a low voice. "I tell you there's something strange about that house. I went over there late this afternoon and found a tramp."

"Where?" broke in George. "In the house?"

"Yes, it was in the house and he at once offered to become my guide, counselor and friend."

"What do you mean?" inquired Grant.

"Just what I say," said Fred. "He showed me through the old building. Finally he took me into the cellar and left me there, though he took pains not to close the old cellar-door. For a while I didn't mind it, but when I found I couldn't get out of the place, for the windows were too small

for me to crawl through, and I couldn't lift the big door, I didn't know just what to do."

"Well, what did you do?" demanded John.

"Why, I called, shouted and whistled through the window, but I couldn't get anybody to pay any attention to me. Yes, there was one who heard me," he added. "He was a small boy driving a cow and when he heard the calls from the old Meeker House he lost no time in withdrawing from that part of the country. Even the cow he was driving seemed to feel just as he did, for her tail went up and her head down and she joined in the race in that graceful, polite way that cows have when they run."

"It's plain you saw something besides the spooks then," said George, laughing heartily. "Look yonder," he added quickly, pointing as he spoke toward the end of the piazza.

In the dim light Uncle Sim was seen standing there, his eye-balls shining and his intense interest in the conversation of the boys manifest in the expression of his face.

"Yas, suh. Yas, suh," he said when the boys first became aware of his presence, "I don' tol' yo' not to go near dat ol' Meeker House."

"Don't you ever go there?" asked Fred.

"Me go dar? No, suh. No, suh. It would take fo' yoke ob oxen to make me go inside dat

ol' house in de daytime and in de night I reckon Caleb's Army couldn't drive me in dar'."

"What became of your tramp friend?" inquired George when the boys arose to enter the room.

"That's what I should like to know," said Fred somewhat ruefully.

"Well, come on in, we'll all feel better after dinner," said George cheerfully, as he led the way into the dining room.

The strange experience which had befallen Fred was the chief topic of conversation. Even their interest, however, was broken when a half-hour had passed and word was brought that Uncle Sim was desirous of speaking at once to Mr. George.

Excusing himself George withdrew from the dining room and a few minutes later when he returned he said, "What do you think has happened, fellows?"

"We don't know. How should we know?" retorted John. "If you've got something to say why don't you say it?"

"That's just what I am going to do," said George, but he had scarcely begun his statement before his three friends leaped from their seats at the table and quickly followed him as he led the way out of the house.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LOST CAR

"WHAT'S the trouble? What's the trouble?" demanded George excitedly when the boys had run out through the kitchen door.

"Uncle Sim says that my car is gone," replied George.

"Gone? Gone where?" demanded Grant.

"He doesn't know and that's what he wanted to find out from us."

"Yas, suh. Yas, suh," broke in the old colored man who now approached the place where the boys were standing. "Dat car sho' am gone. I jes' came to fin' out if any ob yo' young gen'lemen disremembered who might hab tuk de car."

"Why, there hasn't anybody taken it," said John. "Have you looked in the garage, George?"

In spite of his perplexity George laughed slightly as he said, "I certainly have. You don't think I would solemnly state to you that the car was gone if I had seen it in the garage, do you?"

The boys by this time had advanced to the open door of the garage and a hasty examination con-

firmed the statement of the old colored man that the automobile was not there.

"What do you suppose it means?" inquired Fred.

"It means somebody has taken it," replied George.

"You mean stolen it?"

"That's what I don't know. I'm trying to explain to you fellows that the car isn't here and if it isn't here it must be somewhere else. Now, if it is somewhere else how did it get there and who took it there? Do you see? Can I make any impression on any of you?"

"Why don't you say in plain English just what you mean?" retorted John. "Do you think your car has been stolen?"

"I know it's gone and that's all I know."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to take you fellows and Uncle Sim in the old car and find out what has happened to the new one, if I can."

"That's all right, we'll be with you in a minute," declared George.

Speedily the boys entered the house and securing their caps at once prepared to accompany George, who soon started down the lane toward the road beyond. There was no plan clearly defined in his mind nor had any one in the party any suggestions to make as to whom the thief might

be or what had become of the missing automobile.

In response to George's queries Uncle Sim related his own experiences. He had been coming in from the barn and noticed that the door of the garage was still open. As he had strict orders to see that this was closed every night, he turned aside to carry out the directions. To his surprise he found that the new automobile was not in its accustomed place. His first thought naturally was that the boys had taken it for another drive and yet at that very moment he heard the sound of their laughter issuing from the dining-room.

Puzzled by the fact he at once entered the house and soon made his presence and his errand known.

His statement, startling as it was, at first had not alarmed George, but as soon as he had made a hasty investigation he too was as troubled as his dusky friend. The car was gone and there was no accounting for its departure.

"Did any of you fellows hear the automobile when it went down the driveway?" George inquired of his friends as they sped along the dusty road.

"Not one of us," said John, positively.

"That's the trouble in having such a good car," said George dryly. "You see it makes so little noise that it couldn't be heard a few feet away."

"I don't think that was it," spoke up Grant. "I

think it's because certain members of our party were making so much noise that an earthquake or thunder would have been drowned."

"That's all right, then," said George dryly. "You wait until we find that car and then we'll talk a little more about it."

"What was the number of your car?" asked Fred.

"27155."

"I think a man has got more nerve to steal an automobile than anything else. Of course he knows he will be taken," declared Fred.

"Not always," answered George. "Down on the sea shore there was a certain firm last summer that did a regular business in stolen automobiles. They painted them different colors and did a few little things that altered the appearance so that a man wouldn't recognize his own car."

"Is that so? Is that true?" demanded Grant.

"It certainly is. I know a man who lost a car down there. Those men work all through the towns and cities in the northern part of the state and run down to the seashore with the stolen cars in the night when nobody is around and the next day the cars wouldn't be recognized by the very men who were looking for them."

"Well, I hope we shan't find your car down there," said Fred warmly.

"I hope we shan't," replied George, "though the

main thing I want just now is to find the car anyway. Some of the good times I promised you fellows this summer will go begging, I'm afraid, if we have lost our automobile."

"We'll find it, George," said John, patting his friend on the shoulder.

Meanwhile Uncle Sim, who was still a member of the party, had taken no share in the conversation. At that moment, however, he uttered an exclamation of surprise and directed the attention of the Go Ahead boys to the old Meeker House which now was not far ahead of them.

"Yas, suh. Yas, suh," said Uncle Sim, his voice trembling in his excitement. "I sho' do see some lights in dat cellar ob de ol' house. 'Pears like dere's always somethin' wrong in de ole Meeker House."

"How it is, Fred? Do you agree with Uncle Sim?" laughed George.

"I never saw any lights in it," replied Fred glumly.

"No, but that's what you wanted to see, I guess, more than anything else," laughed Grant. "But there's a light there now," he added suddenly, "I saw it myself. It shines for a minute and then it is gone. There it is again!" he exclaimed a moment later. "You can see it shining through the cellar windows. What do you suppose it is?"

"Spooks," said George solemnly. "They

usually have a supper there once a year and I think to-night is the regular time for their meeting."

"Do you want to stop?" demanded Fred quickly.

"I don't mind," replied George. There was no enthusiasm, however, manifest among the boys, although every one jokingly declared that he was not afraid. The excuse was commonly given that the necessity of hasty investigation into the loss of the automobile demanded action in other directions. Consequently no stop was made and although every boy was frequently glancing behind him at the old Meeker House no light was seen nor did any additional or unusual sounds come from that direction.

When the boys had gone beyond the corner their thoughts once more returned to the problem which was confronting them. The mystery of the lost car must be solved. Although there were many suggestions offered there was not one of the boys that had any clearly outlined plan as to what must be done in order to find the lost car or obtain information concerning those who had taken it.

"I have a suggestion," broke in Grant at last.

"What's that?" demanded Fred.

"Why, it's your friend, the tramp. Probably he's the man who has been hanging around the place for several days and when his opportunity came he took it."

"Which do you mean, the opportunity, or the car?" laughed Fred.

"Both. His opportunity was to take the car."

"That tramp," declared Fred solemnly, "didn't have strength enough about him to push the button to turn on the power."

"That's something you don't know," retorted his friend. "I think when you are through with it you'll find that the car disappeared at the same time the tramp did. No one has seen him since," added Grant, positively.

"And from all I can learn," retorted Fred, "nobody saw him before except myself, so you haven't run down your problem yet."

When the boys arrived at the Corners, as the little nearby hamlet was called, they made many inquiries of the people they met, but no word concerning the missing car was heard. There were several suggestions from the country people that other cars had been lost within the past few weeks, but none of them was able to add to the information which the boys already possessed.

Disappointed by their failures, George at last said, "I think the best thing for us to do will be to go back home. I'll call up my father on the 'phone and if he isn't coming out pretty soon he will tell me what to do."

In response to George's suggestion the boys once more clambered into the car and in a brief

time were noisily speeding over the road on their way back to their friend's house.

"We've got two mysteries now," suggested George.

"Three you mean," spoke up Fred quickly.

"We've got the mystery of the lost car and the mystery of the old Meeker House. That makes two. I don't see where your third comes in."

"The third is our mysterious friend, the tramp, that I saw in the old Meeker House."

"What's the mystery about him?" laughed George. "I don't find anything very mysterious about an unwashed tramp you found in the old house. Very likely he had crawled in there to sleep and you waked him up."

"He was awake all right," declared Fred promptly. "There isn't any question about that. He wasn't moving around as fast as I have seen some, but he didn't take it all out in motions, either."

"It seems to me," laughed Grant, "that you find in that tramp whatever you want to find, Fred. First you say he's one kind of man and then you tell us he's another."

"Wait until you see him," said Fred sagely. "Maybe he's in the old house now. It can't be far ahead."

"Not more than a quarter of a mile," suggested Grant.

For some reason the boys became silent as the car speeded forward in the dim light. The eyes of every one were turned toward the old house which had perplexed them in so many ways.

As they came near the corner John said in a low voice, "There's not only a ghost of a man in that house, but there's the ghost of the automobile. Do you hear that horn?"

All the boys listened intently and to their consternation the faint sound of a horn was heard, issuing from the old house.

"What do you suppose that means?" demanded Fred in a whisper.

"I told you there was the ghost of an automobile in that house, didn't I?" demanded John.

"Look yonder," called Grant quickly. "There's that light again in the cellar. Don't you think we had better stop and find out what all this means?"

At that moment the faint sound of the horn was heard again from the house and for an instant lights flashed from every window.

These, however, quickly disappeared and although the boys waited several minutes, the sound was not repeated nor were the lights again seen.

CHAPTER IX

ANOTHER FLIGHT

"WHAT do you suppose that means?" demanded Fred in a whisper.

"Things are seldom what they seem," said Grant.

"What do you mean?" again demanded Fred, turning sharply upon his friend. "Don't you think there are lights there? Didn't you hear the sound of the automobile horn?"

"I certainly did," acknowledged Grant, "but that isn't all there is to it. There are some things we don't see in connection with these things."

"Come on," urged George, "let's all get out and go in there and see if we cannot see those other things that Grant is telling about."

For a moment there was silence in the little party, but at last, as no one was desirous of being looked upon as cowardly by his friends, all four boys stepped down upon the ground.

"Come on, Uncle Sim," called George. "You aren't going to be left behind."

"We don' lose one car," remarked the aged negro, his teeth chattering as he spoke.

"And we don't want to lose another, do we, Uncle Sim?" said George. "I don't think anybody can take it without our knowing it, so you can come along, Uncle Sim, if you want to."

"Yas, suh. Yas, suh," responded the negro. "D'rec'ly, d'rec'ly."

George laughed, as the old man slowly and with manifest reluctance climbed down upon the ground. His "mis'ry" plainly was unusually troublesome, for he walked with a great effort and very slowly. Indeed, he groaned with every step that he took, as he followed the boys on their way to the old house.

Silence fell upon the party when they drew near the building. No lights now were to be seen in any of its windows. Silence rested over the quaint old structure and apparently there was nothing to explain the strange sights and sounds which recently had issued from the venerable building.

"You boys stay here and go into the house by the front door and I'll go around to the kitchen," said George.

"What for?" demanded Fred.

"Why, we'll be more certain," explained George, "to find out if there is anything wrong here if we come at the old house from two sides."

"I think I'll go with you," spoke up Grant quickly.

"There's no need of that," protested George

sharply. Indeed the lad spoke too sharply, for the suspicions of Grant were instantly aroused by the evident desire of his friend not to have him accompany him. Knowledge of that fact, however, was sufficient of itself to increase Grant's determination.

"We had better divide up the party evenly," he suggested. "John and Fred can stay here and watch this side and I'll go with you around to the kitchen door."

With manifest reluctance, though he made no further protest, George accepted the suggestion of his friend and together the two boys soon disappeared from the sight of their companions.

"Who's that?" whispered Fred as he grasped the arm of John, who was standing beside him, and pointing to an approaching figure of a man.

"That's Uncle Sim," replied John after a hasty glance at the approaching form.

John's words were verified when a few moments later Uncle Sim, his voice trembling and his terror manifest in his entire bearing, approached the spot where the two boys were standing. Indeed, had it not been for the presence of John and Fred, Uncle Sim with all his "mis'ry" would not have been induced to approach the uncanny place.

"Come on," said John a moment later. "We're going into the house to find out about those lights."

No protest was made and together the two boys, followed by Uncle Sim, whose reluctance manifestly increased with every passing moment, pushed open the sagging front door and entered the front room.

For a moment they were unable to distinguish any objects in the darkness. From the small windows the faint light entered, but it was not sufficient to enable the boys to see about them. Suddenly the strange whirring of winds was heard again. Now the sound came from the ceiling and then again it seemed to the startled boys that it was close to the place where they were standing. Back and forth and up and down the strange sounds continued, occasionally broken by a plaintive note as if the creature that was darting about the room was in terror or pain.

Uncle Sim, unable longer to control his feelings, began to pray, but even his prayer did not prevent him from speedily fleeing from the room.

Fred glanced through the open door and saw the old negro making most excellent time as he ran across the field toward the waiting automobile. Under other circumstances he would have laughed heartily, but just now there was excitement sufficient to prevent the boys from following the retreating old negro.

In the midst of the sounds of the wings suddenly a prolonged groan was heard. It seemed

to both Fred and John that it issued from some place close to them. Several times the startling noise was repeated and then was followed by a strange whistling.

For some reason, which neither of the two boys explained to the other, they had not advanced farther into the room. Both glanced behind them to make certain that the door was still open and their way of escape was unimpeded.

"Where are the other fellows?" whispered Fred.

"I don't know. Shall I call them?"

"Yes," said Fred eagerly.

"Hello, there is George. Where are you, Grant?" called John, striving to speak boldly, though in spite of his efforts his voice trembled as he spoke.

Instead of a response from their companion a faint sound of an auto horn was heard in the old building. It was mournful beyond the power of either boy to describe. Instead of the sharp, short "honk," it was prolonged and weird.

"This is too much for me," said Fred sharply. "I have seen all I want to see. The other fellows aren't here and I'm not going into this old house any further unless I can see my way."

"What's that? What's that?" whispered John excitedly.

As he spoke the sound of some one running

around the corner of the house was heard by both boys. In a moment John and Fred were outside the old building and as they became aware that the fugitives were George and Grant they lost no time in following them.

In the distance Uncle Sim could be seen climbing into the automobile. It was marvelous too what excellent time all four boys were making. Swiftly as George and Grant were running they were soon overtaken by their companions and together all four arrived at the place in the road where their automobile had been left.

At that moment there came a sound from the old Meeker House very like a wild burst of laughter. This was repeated and the terror of Uncle Sim became still more pronounced.

"There goes that auto horn again," said George, as he grasped the wheel and looked behind to see if his friends were ready to start. "Uncle Sim," called George just before he started, "I wish you would see if that back tire on the left is all right. We don't want to start out on a flat tire."

"Yas, suh. Yas, suh," answered Uncle Sim quickly, as he obediently climbed out of the car and inspected the tire. "It's all right, suh," he repeated. "It's all right."

In his eagerness to be gone George at once started, unaware that the aged negro had not yet returned to his seat.

His ignorance was speedily dispelled when from the darkness behind them came several agonizing calls for help, "Hi dar, don't leave me! Don't leave me! Wait! Wait dar!"

As the boys glanced behind them they saw the old man running swiftly toward them and making even better time than when he had departed from the old Meeker House.

Obediently George stopped the automobile and in a moment Uncle Sim, breathless and excited, climbed into the seat.

"There's one thing I don't understand, Uncle Sim," said George, laughing as he spoke.

"Yas, suh. Yas, suh," responded the negro. "Dat's jes' de way I feel."

"What I can't understand," said George, "is why it is so hard for you to walk when you are working around the place and it's so easy for you to run when you have been left behind."

"Dat's so. Yas, suh," answered the negro. "I jes' cain't explain dat mahself."

Apparently George was the only member of the party that was willing to talk and even he soon lost his desire as few responses were made to his various suggestions.

Uncle Sim, however, with chattering teeth and trembling voice, frequently expressed his displeasure over the attempt of the boys to belittle

the sounds which had come from the old Meeker House.

At last Uncle Sim declared solemnly, "I jes' made up my mind how dat ar automobile was taken."

"How was that?" demanded George.

"It's de spooks back in de ole Meeker House. Dey make all de trouble."

The four boys were now far enough from the scene of their recent adventure to permit of their looking more calmly at their surroundings. Their former fear had departed as the distance between them and the old house had increased. When Uncle Sim made this solemn declaration as to the cause of the loss of the automobile they all laughed heartily, although the aged negro strongly maintained his repeated declarations.

"Yas, suh. Yas, suh," he declared, "Dar's somethin' strange 'bout all dis rumpus. Yo' hear de spirits in de ole house and you see de lights from de windows, and den you hear de autermobile ho'n. Dat's de way it is, yas, suh. Yo' couldn't find that automobile if yo' was to search dat old house from de cellar up to de garret and yet de ho'n kept er blowin' and er blowin' all de time."

"I think you're mistaken, Uncle Sim," laughed George.

"No, suh. No, suh. Dat's jes' de way it is. I feel shore you'll neber see dat autermobile agin."

"You think it is in the old house?" demanded Fred.

"No, suh. No, suh. I didn't say as how it is exac'ly *in* de ole house, but what I says is dat de persons what's in de ole house can tell yo' what become of dat ar autermobile, an' it was our autermobile ho'n what was er blowin' dar. Yas, suh, I'd know dat ho'n if I heard it er hundred miles from here."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said George suddenly.

"Tell ahead," said Fred. "What is it you'll do?"

"I'll dare the crowd to go back to the old Meeker House."

"We'll take your dare," responded Fred promptly.

CHAPTER X

THE CAPTURE IN THE PASS

THERE was no enthusiasm manifest among the four boys when again they walked across the field on their way to the old Meeker House. As they came near the building, suddenly lights were seen in the windows once more and a faint sound of the automobile horn again was heard.

"Shall we go in?" inquired Fred, his voice trembling in spite of his attempt to control it.

"It's getting late," suggested George. There was a note of laughter in his voice, but his companions were so excited that they were scarcely aware of it. "Perhaps we had better put it off until some other time."

"That's the way I feel about it," joined in John.

"All right," said George, " and we must look after our car too. My father wouldn't want me to lose the old car as well as the new one."

Like the famous soldiers who marched up the hill and then marched down again, the Go Ahead boys without protest on the part of any member

of the party retraced their way to the road and silently took their places in the car.

Conversation lagged and when at last they arrived at George's home they left the car in the garage and then quickly entered the house.

When they came into the room where the lights were shining they stared blankly at one another for a moment and then laughed loudly.

"What a pack of brave fellows we are, aren't we?" said George.

"We are going to find out about that old house," declared John quietly.

To the surprise of the boys George's father had arrived during their absence. He was an interested listener to the story which the boys had to relate, although none of them detected the sly glance which passed between him and George. Evidently there was something understood by them which was unknown to the others.

"Yes," said Mr. Sanders when the boys were seated in the room. "There have been some strange occurrences in this part of the country from the days when it was first settled."

"I guess that's so," said Grant. "We were hearing about the young fellow who was captured up here in the Ramapo Pass in the Revolution."

"Do you mean young Montagnie?"

"We don't know his name," replied Grant, "but

it was the one who was used by Washington as a messenger without his understanding it."

"That's the fellow," said Mr. Sanders. "I have always been greatly interested in him. I do not think people ever have appreciated the part he took in the plan which Washington wanted to try. He was a fine young chap, about twenty years of age, and was a licensed preacher. Washington had heard such good reports of him that when he came to try his plan he sent for young Montagnie one morning up on the Hudson at Dobbs Ferry. It was there the Continental army was encamped at the time. The general told Montagnie that he had heard good reports of him and the young soldier was so embarrassed that he could only stammer his thanks. Then Washington went on to tell him that he wanted him to go across the country and through the Ramapo Pass and carry a message to General Heath, who was then at Morristown. He explained carefully how the papers were to be sewed inside the lining of his coat. Young Montagnie agreed, but suggested that he knew a better way across the country. There was danger of his being taken if he should go down through the Ramapo Valley. It is said that Washington drew himself up to his full height and looked sternly at the young soldier as he thundered at him, 'It is your business to obey.' And of course there was nothing more to be said."

"He must have had a strange feeling when he went down through the Pass," suggested John. "He knew what the danger was and at the same time he knew that he could find his way safely across the country without going into the Pass. It seems strange that he did not suspect the trick Washington was trying to play."

"Apparently he didn't suspect anything," said Mr. Sanders. "It was early in the morning when he entered the narrow defile. The only weapon he had was a stout club and he was swinging along at a good rate, confident that if he once safely got through the Pass many of his perils would be over. He had just entered one end of the Pass when he saw five men coming in at the other end.

"He instantly recognized the leader as young Richard Smith, whose father he had seen hanged up in Goshen a few days before this time. You see his father was one of the worst of the cowboys. At least many of his dastardly deeds were committed against the colonists, but he didn't stop for that and he was willing to have dealings with either side, provided he made by the transaction."

"What was he hanged for?" inquired John.

"Why, the people became so indignant at last that about two hundred of the boys and men started after him one day. Of course he ran then, but they chased him clear down to Long Island."

"Did they catch him?" inquired John.

"They most certainly did, and they brought him back to Goshen and he was hanged there in the courtyard. Then his son, Richard, declared he would revenge his father's death and it was this young man whom Montagnie saw when he came into the Ramapo Pass just at sunrise that morning away back in 1781.

"The young messenger felt of the letter inside the lining of his coat to make sure that it was safe and grasping his club more firmly and doing his utmost to appear indifferent he at once turned and approached the men. Very likely he would have run if he thought he could escape in that manner, but he had no weapon except his club while the others were armed. He well knew that if he should try to escape they would at once start after him.

"He quietly saluted the men when he passed them and received a grunt from Richard in response. However, he was not critical, as now he was hoping that his peril had been passed. He was not to get away so easily, however, for before he came out into the open road he was hailed by the men behind him and ordered to stop. Once more the young preacher was tempted to run, but he was aware that his effort would be useless. Accordingly he waited for the men to come back to him, and when Richard Smith gruffly demanded who he was and where he was going he answered

in a general way saying that he was simply going across the country. 'That won't do,' said Richard loudly, 'that may mean to New York or it may mean to Morristown. Who are you anyway?'

"By this time Montagnie was convinced that he was in deadly peril and he quickly decided to sell his life as dearly as possible. Swinging his club he knocked down one of them and leaping over his prostrate body started up the steep side of the Pass. For some reason he was not fired upon but before he gained the top he was astonished to see two of the party whom he had left in the valley now approaching from above him, almost as if they had dropped out of the clouds."

"How did they do it?" inquired Grant.

"Very likely they knew of a short cut. At all events the young messenger was caught between the two parties. They took him to a little shanty in the woods and then began to search him. They cut his hat into shreds, and of course found nothing valuable. Then they made him take off his coat and as soon as they had cut the lining they discovered the letters which were hidden there.

"Young Montagnie expected every moment that he would be shot or hanged. One of the common methods of hanging employed by the cowboys in those days was to put a noose around the prisoner's neck, tie the rope to the limb of a tree after they had put the man on horseback, and then, when

they struck the horse and it started quickly, the wretched victim was left hanging in the air. But for some unexplained reason young Montagnie was simply kept in the house three days. Then when he still confidently believed that he was being led to his death he was taken down the Hudson and carried across to New York, where he was shut up in the old Van Cortlandt Sugar House, which stood near the corner of what is now Broadway and Cortlandt Street. You see there were so many American prisoners in New York that the British had to make use of some of the big buildings besides the jails."

"Yes," suggested John, "I have heard that they used some of the churches as jails."

"They did," responded Mr. Sanders.

"Well, what happened to young Montagnie?"

"I was just about to tell you," said Sanders, smiling as he spoke. "Naturally he felt very bitter when he found himself a prisoner in the old sugar-house. He was so thoroughly convinced that his capture was useless and that he might have made his way successfully across the country to Morristown, that he was angry at Washington for his arbitrary command.

"However, three days later his keeper showed him a copy of *Rivington's Gazette.* Rivington was a printer in New York and was a very bitter

Tory. Montagnie was not especially interested when he first took the paper, but in a moment he was keenly excited when his eye fell upon an announcement that one of Washington's messengers had been captured and that valuable information had been found concealed in his coat. The statement further announced that in this paper was a letter from General Washington to General Heath in which the commander explained that he was about to attack the British in New York and expected to find General Clinton entirely unprepared for such action.

"And at that very time," resumed Mr. Sanders, "Washington with his little army had crossed the Delaware River and was on his way toward Yorktown to help Greene and Lafayette. It was impossible now for Clinton to leave New York, believing as he did that it was about to be attacked, and even after he had found out the trick which Washington had played upon him it was too late for him to try to transport his army by sea because Washington would arrive at Yorktown before the red coats possibly could come to the aid of Cornwallis. The battle of Yorktown followed, as you know, and Cornwallis and his army were made prisoners. Indeed it was at Yorktown that really the final independence of the Colonies was won. But I have always felt that the

part which young Montagnie took in winning the victory at Yorktown has never been known as it ought to be."

"What became of him?" inquired Fred.

"I don't know. I have often tried to find out," replied Mr. Sanders. "You see the men in those days were so busy making history that they had little time in which to write it. As a consequence there are many things which we would like to know, but do not.

"Now," continued Mr. Sanders as he arose from his seat, "I understand that you boys have lost an automobile."

"We didn't lose it," exclaimed George; "it was stolen."

"It seems to me," said Mr. Sanders, "that if you had an automobile and haven't one now you must have lost it, whatever the way in which it disappeared."

CHAPTER XI

THE SEARCH FOR THE MISSING CAR

"WHAT are you going to do?" inquired Mr. Sanders.

"We don't know what to do," explained Fred. "We thought when you came out here you would tell us."

"I think I shall leave it for you boys to settle among yourselves."

"But don't you want to get your car back?" demanded Grant in surprise.

"Indeed I do," said Mr. Sanders.

"Then," exclaimed Grant, "I should think you would want to help us find it."

"It's possible that I may try some plans of my own," explained Mr. Sanders, "but meanwhile I am willing for the Go Ahead boys to see what they can do in the way of restoring the car."

"It's a strange thing," said George, "how that car ever could have been taken out of our yard without some of us hearing it. I explained to the boys," he added laughingly," that it was such a good car that they couldn't hear the engine."

"That may be true," spoke up Fred, "but we had another explanation."

"What was that?" inquired Mr. Sanders.

"Why, we said some of the fellows were making so much noise that they might have taken a threshing machine out of the garage and not one of us would have heard it."

"I don't mind explaining to you," said Mr. Sanders, "that I have sent a brief description of the car to several of the nearby cities. My impression is that the automobile hasn't gone very far from home, but one cannot tell about that. Perhaps we shall get some word from Newark or New York pretty soon."

"Do you think they would take that car to New York?" demanded Fred. "I thought George said that they had had trouble a year or two ago when a lot of automobiles were stolen and taken down to Lakewood or somewhere along the Jersey shore."

"That may be true," said Mr. Sanders. "I have taken a few steps in the matter, but I am going to leave the most of it to the Go Ahead boys. I shall expect you to get some trace of the car before I come out for the week-end. I am compelled to go back to the city to-morrow morning, so I must leave you boys to your own devices."

"Well," said George just before the boys sought their rooms, "to-morrow morning we'll start out

and begin our search for that missing automobile."

The following morning, after the departure of Mr. Sanders, the boys were soon ready for their expedition. That is, all were ready except John, who, for reasons which he did not fully explain, said that he would wait until the following day before he joined in the search for the missing car.

Before the three boys and Uncle Sim took their seats in the automobile Fred drew his elongated friend to one side and pulling his head down until it was on a level with his own whispered to him.

The conversation between the two friends was brief, but when Fred responded to the hail of his comrades and ran to take his seat in the automobile, there was an expression upon his face which indicated that the cause of the failure of John to accompany them was not altogether unknown to him.

In a brief time the car with its inmates disappeared around the bend in the road and John was no longer to be seen.

"I think I'll go first to Paterson," explained George, to the two boys, "and then I'll stop at every garage along the road between there and Newark."

When they arrived at Paterson they sought the quarters of the chief of police and all three boys entered the room.

George was the spokesman for the party and he briefly explained the loss which had befallen them.

The chief of police listened attentively, made notes of several statements which George made and then said, "We shall do our best for you. The trouble is that stolen cars frequently are mutilated or repainted or something is done to them which prevents an owner from recognizing his own property."

"My father too is sending out word about the car," suggested George.

"That's right, that's the only thing to do. It's one of the things you never can tell about. You may find the car in a country garage, or in a big city, or you may not find it at all."

"Don't you think we'll find it?" demanded George.

"I cannot say. Have you offered a reward for its recovery?"

"I don't know," admitted George. "My father has charge of that. If he has offered a reward he hasn't told me about it."

"Yes, I see," said the chief slowly, looking sternly at George as he sqoke. "There may be reasons why he doesn't want to tell you about it."

"What reasons?" demanded George.

"If you don't know I shan't tell you."

"Do you think we took the car?" demanded George hotly.

"I'm not saying anything about that part of it. I don't know. I'm going to take your directions and do my best to locate the car and the thief too, if I can. It won't make any difference to me where I hit or who it is. When we find the party that stole the car shall we report?"

George was too angry to continue the conversation and turning abruptly from the room he joined his companions, and together they hastily reëntered the car.

"Never mind, George," said Fred cheerfully; "don't forget that we're the Go Ahead boys, and if the car is anywhere in Jersey we'll try to find it."

"But we haven't any plan," suggested Grant. "What do you intend to do, George?"

"Find the car. That's as far as I have got now. I think I will stop at every garage along the road and find out if any one has seen or heard anything about our lost car."

"You'll stand about as good a chance of finding it as you will of finding a needle in a haystack," laughed Grant. "However, if that's what you want, I'm perfectly willing to go along with you."

"That's very kind and considerate on your part," remarked George dryly, as the car started swiftly along the country road into which they now had turned.

"I don't see anything," suggested Grant, who

was the first to break in upon the silence. "I don't see anything to prevent the thief taking the car into New York City or going to Philadelphia with it."

"There isn't anything," said George quietly.

"And even after he has gone into New York or Pennsylvania he can come back again and double on his tracks. I don't see much hope of your ever finding your car."

"Perhaps we shan't find it," admitted George, "but I belong to a crowd that's known as the Go Ahead boys and we aren't beaten before we start, anyway. If we have to give up it will be after we have done our best."

"That's the way to talk!" broke in Fred. "We're going ahead anyway and we're going to get where we started for, too."

"What will you do if you find your car?" inquired Grant.

"Take it, of course," said George.

"But suppose somebody has bought it from the thief? He won't give the car back to you without your proving that it belongs to you."

"Then we'll prove it," said George quietly.

"What will you do with your thief if you find him?"

"I'll wait until I find him," said George.

"You know," broke in Fred, "I sometimes think it wasn't any thief that stole that car anyway."

"What do you mean, pygmy?" demanded both boys together as they looked keenly at their diminutive friend.

"You know just as well as I do," said Fred sturdily.

"I haven't the remotest idea what you mean," said Grant. "You'll have to try to make the point plain."

"You mean," retorted Fred, "that you have to be helped to see a point once in your life."

"Go ahead, Fred," called George sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Why you heard the tooting of that horn in the old Meeker House the same as I did," said Fred.

"You think the car is in that old house?" demanded Grant.

"I didn't say so," said Fred, "but I do say that the horn that belongs to George's car is in that old house, or else the horn that is there is so like it that you couldn't tell them apart."

George laughed quietly and said, "Next thing, Fred, you'll be telling us that the spooks stole the car."

"I'm not so sure that they didn't," said Fred.

"If they did, then what we'll find in the old Meeker House will be only the ghost of the car, I'm afraid."

Conversation ceased and at every garage along

the road George stopped and made inquiries concerning the missing automobile.

It was late in the afternoon when the Go Ahead boys turned homeward. Not an inkling had they received of the stolen car. Several times they had been informed that "A good many cars of late have been stolen," but the knowledge brought neither comfort nor light.

"George," suggested Fred, "suppose we go home by the road where the old Meeker House is."

George smiled dryly as he replied, "All right. The way is as short if I turn in there as in any other way. What are you looking for, the ghost of the lost automobile?"

Fred shook his head and did not reply, but when at last in the dusk they drew near the place where the mysterious old house was standing, all were convinced that they heard a faint sound of an automobile horn coming from the place.

CHAPTER XII

A HASTY DEPARTURE

AS the speed of the automobile was instantly decreased, Fred said excitedly, "Stop, George! I say it is time for us to find out about this thing and quit all our foolishness."

"What do you want to do?" demanded George.

"I want to go into that old house and find out just what all this mystery means."

"I don't dare leave the car," said George.

"Then you stay here and look after it," retorted Fred. "Grant and I will make our own inspections, won't we?" he added as he turned to his companion.

Grant did not speak, but as he quickly leaped out of the car his example was at once followed by Fred and together the two boys started toward the house, the dim outline of which could be seen before them.

It was an ideal summer night. There was no moon, but as there were not many clouds in the sky the two boys were able to see about them in every direction. Crickets noisily were proclaim-

ing their presence and the not unmusical notes of the tree toads joined in a chorus that arose from every side.

In silence the boys approached the front door of the house and just as they were about to enter there came again that mocking sound of an automobile horn.

In spite of his declaration of his courage Fred instantly gripped his companion's arm. Neither of the boys spoke as they halted for a moment on the stone door-step.

The startling noise of the horn was followed by sounds even more unexpected. There were shouts and calls and cries issuing from within the building. In the midst of this strange confusion there was also heard the sound of laughter.

The combination at first appeared to be almost too strong for the nerves of the two Go Ahead boys. For an instant they turned and were looking back at the road where George was waiting for them in his automobile.

"Come on," said Fred, his voice trembling in spite of his courageous attitude. "Come on in, Grant. We must find out about this thing."

Before Grant could reply, suddenly around the corner of the house two men were seen. Both were running swiftly and apparently were unmindful of the presence of the boys.

The two ghostly forms moved swiftly across

the intervening field and were apparently running directly toward the automobile in the road.

The sight was more than either Grant or Fred was able to endure. Without another word both leaped from the stone steps and in their swiftest paces ran down the old pathway eager to gain the shelter of the waiting automobile.

"What's the trouble?" demanded George as his companions joined him. "What's happened? Is there anything wrong?"

"Don't talk about it now," said Fred. "Put on all the speed you have got and we'll tell you later what happened."

"I don't believe there's any such great need of haste," said George dryly. "Why not go back and find out what the cause of all the trouble is?"

"You may go if you want to," retorted Fred, "but I'm not going to try it again to-night."

"The Go Ahead boys apparently are in motion, but not in the right direction," suggested George demurely.

"The right direction," declared Fred, "is straight toward your house." As he spoke he glanced again at the Meeker place and as he did so discovered the two ghostly forms that were still moving across the field.

"Both of them came out of the house," he said in a loud whisper, "while we were on the front door-step."

"Oh, I guess not," said George tantalizingly. "It's probably two men that took a short cut. They were coming from the other road."

"Don't you believe it!" maintained Fred stoutly. "They came out of that old Meeker House. Didn't they, Grant?" he added, turning to his friend for confirmation.

"Yes, they came out of the house," said Grant brusquely. It was plain the boy was not enjoying the recollection of the swift flight which he and Fred had made to rejoin George.

"Get your car under motion," said Fred sharply. "We don't want to stay here any longer. We'll tell you what happened when you get out on the main road."

"Just as you say," laughed George.

A moment later the automobile was moving swiftly down the road. As it come near the place where the two forms had been seen it was evident that both were seeking to gain the road in advance of the automobile.

"Maybe the spooks will try to get this car, too," suggested George in a low voice.

At that moment there came a hail from the two men in advance and at the sound George laughed loudly.

"Do you know who that is?" he demanded, turning to his companions.

"Who is it?" inquired Fred.

"Why it's John and Uncle Sim. They want to ride home. I guess I'll pretend not to know who they are and put on a little more speed."

As he spoke the car began to move more swiftly, a sight which at once called forth louder shouts of protest from the two men who now were near the fence along the roadside.

"Let them in. Let them in," said Grant.

"All right, just as you say," replied George, and as he spoke he brought the automobile to a standstill.

"What do you want?" he called to the two men who now were climbing the fence.

"We want you to take us home," replied one of the two.

"Is that you, John?"

"It certainly is."

"Well, I couldn't tell," laughed George. "You look more like a string than ever. Is that Uncle Sim with you?"

"Yas, suh. Yas, suh," spoke up the negro promptly.

"Then you have been over to the old Meeker House, have you?" inquired George as John and the colored man took their seats in the car.

"Yes, we have been there," abruptly replied John.

"You didn't seem to stay very long," suggested

George. "Were there any special reasons why you didn't want to tarry any longer?"

"Dere sho' was," spoke up Uncle Sim, his teeth chattering as he spoke. "Yas, suh. Yas, suh, dere sho' was." Lifting his face toward the sky the old colored man muttered some incantations or prayers which in a measure indicated the terror which possessed him. He was trembling in every limb and when he tried to speak his lower jaw, over which he apparently had lost control, resounded as it repeatedly struck the teeth on his upper jaw.

"Never mind, Uncle Sim," said George, noticing the abject terror of the old man. "We'll soon be out of this. I don't see why you went back there when you're so afraid of the old place."

"Yas, suh. Yas, suh," stammered Uncle Sim. "I don' went jes' because dis young man 'sist on my goin' wif him."

"Was he afraid to go alone?"

"Yas, suh. Yas, suh."

"Did he think he would be less scared if there were two than he would be if he was there alone?" laughed George.

"That's all right, George," broke in John, "you don't know what you're talking about. If you had heard what we did you would have made better time than either of us when we were trying to head you off."

"What did you hear?"

"Why, we heard the same old sound and a lot more. Just as true as I am sitting here there was a voice that sounded all through the house and it was calling, 'John, John'."

"Did you answer it?"

"Did I answer it? No, sir, I didn't answer it. I was out of that house before you could count ten."

"I didn't know that it affected you that way," laughed George, "to have anybody speak to you."

"It doesn't to have any live body, but that name was sounded all through the house. It wasn't loud either, it was just that whispered, 'John, John,' that I don't think I shall ever forget as long as I live."

"It seems to have affected Uncle Sim even worse than it did you," suggested George, as Uncle Sim clasped his hands and lifted them far above his head and offered various incantations, as if he were doing his utmost to ward off the evil spirits.

"Well, all I have got to say," explained George at last, "is that the Go Ahead boys ought to change their name."

"Why?" demanded Fred sharply.

"Because it seems to me that they can leave any place and make better time than anybody I have ever seen. Even Uncle Sim forgets his

rheumatism and 'mis'ry' and keeps up with John when he races across the field. To-morrow morning I will give John one dollar if he will make as good time from the old Meeker House out to the road as he made to-night when it was dark."

"Never you mind about that!" retorted John. "You didn't see all that I saw."

"But you haven't told us what you saw."

"I told you something I heard. If you had heard your own name coming down the chimney and through the windows and up from the cellar, out of the attic, in the hallway, down the stairs and everywhere at the same time you wouldn't have stayed there any longer either."

"Perhaps I wouldn't," admitted George, "but my feeling is that you didn't hear half as much as you thought you did."

"No, sir," responded John. "I have told you only half what I did hear."

"Well go ahead with your story."

"I'm not going to talk until we get home."

CHAPTER XIII

WORD CONCERNING THE LOST CAR

CONVERSATION ceased during the remainder of the ride. The silence was broken two or three times by George, who was driving the car as he looked behind him at his companions and laughed aloud. No response was given to his implied invitations to describe their feelings and as they came nearer the end of their journey the chagrin under which all three boys were suffering became still more marked.

At last when they were once more in the house, Fred, unable longer to remain silent, said abruptly, "I know there isn't anything in the racket at the old Meeker House, but in spite of it all I confess I'm scared when I hear those strange sounds."

"What are you afraid of?" laughed George.

"I don't know what I'm afraid of," said Fred, "but it scares me half out of my wits."

"There's something very strange about it," broke in John. "I don't believe in spooks and such things, but no one has told us yet what the sound of those flying wings means and they

haven't explained how a fellow can get in there and hear his name called from seven different parts of the house at the same time."

"What about that horn?" inquired Grant. "That's the strangest part of it all to me."

"Do you know," said Fred, "I'm sure that horn that blows in the old house is the one that used to be on George's car."

"No, it can't be," said George. "There's nothing but ghosts in the Meeker House and so it could be only the ghost of that horn if there really is anything there."

"Well, it isn't the ghost of a sound," declared John positively. "It's a real noise let me tell you and when you hear it as I did to-night, first right close to your ear, and then, a second or two later, sounding as if it came from the attic or the cellar you're ready to believe almost anything."

"Too ready, I'm afraid," laughed George.

"The next time we go there," spoke up Fred, "I move that George Sanders be selected to go into the house by the front door. If you remember, fellows, he has always slipped out every time we went there and gone around to the kitchen door."

"I believe he knows more about it than he has told us yet," declared John.

"All I know," said George solemnly, "is that

some of the Go Ahead boys have reversed their name. Whenever they pluck up courage enough to go to the old house they always go there with fear and trembling. They walk as if they were traveling to their own funeral, but when they leave they make better time than I ever saw any of them make on the cinder path. I think that we ought to change the name. They aren't Go Ahead boys any more, they are the Go Backward or the Get Away boys."

"I notice," spoke up Grant, "that you didn't stand very long in the way of your own departure. At least I haven't noticed yet that you have been very far behind any of us when we ran from the place."

"Of course you haven't," said George. "I have to look after my guests, don't I? And if they are in such a hurry to leave, it wouldn't be very polite for me to stay."

"Don't leave on our account," said Fred dryly.

"I guess there isn't much danger that you wouldn't any other time," laughed George. "Perhaps you don't need any help after all. I was just trying to be polite."

"It's too great an effort," said Fred. "Don't try it again, but what are you going to do about that stolen car?"

"I'm going ahead," replied George.

"You certainly have a strange way of doing

it then," retorted Fred. "It seems to me you were going all around it."

"Never you mind," said George. "We'll have that car back in our garage in less than a week, you mark my words and see if we don't."

"If we do," declared Grant, "it won't be any fault of ours. I guess your father will be the one that will find it."

"He will help," laughed George.

"Help," repeated Fred. "If we keep up the idiotic kind of a search we made to-day I guess he will have to do the whole thing."

"Perhaps he will," admitted George. "I'm not jealous. If we can only get that car back, that's about all I want."

"Well, I'm going to bed," declared John. "This has been my busy day."

"And you haven't told us yet what you were doing," suggested Grant.

"I guess I don't have to tell you," said John. "All three of you seem to know more about Uncle Sim and me and what we have been doing to-day than we do ourselves."

In a brief time the boys had withdrawn from the room and sought their beds.

The following morning when three of the Go Ahead boys went down stairs they discovered George talking over the telephone.

"Yes," he was saying. "That's all right.

We'll start right after breakfast. Thank you very much. Good-by."

As he hung up the receiver George turned to his friends and said, "What would you fellows say if I told you that I had some word about the car?"

"We would all say that it was a good word, anyway," said Fred promptly.

"I was just talking to my father who told me that he had received a telegram this morning from Newburgh."

"That's in New York State," spoke up Fred.

"Correct," answered George. "I'm glad that for once in your life you are correctly informed."

"You want to be thankful," retorted Fred, "that once in your life you were able to appreciate the information I possess. I haven't a stingy thing about me, and I have been trying to be generous and give you some of the knowledge I have acquired, after long and painful effort, but you do not seem to appreciate my kind heart."

"My father says that the best thing for us to do will be to take the old car and go straight to Newburgh. We may have to stay all night, so you had better go prepared."

"We aren't going before breakfast, are we?" demanded Grant.

"No, my lean and hungry friend, we'll wait until the wants of the inner man are satisfied."

"Not that," said Fred. "Not that. You mean

you will wait long enough for him to eat all he needs, but not all he wants. We aren't going to start from here before sunset, if you don't mean that."

Conversation was not as brisk after the boys entered the dining room, but when their breakfast had been eaten and they followed George as he led the way to the garage they were all as talkative as before.

"Going to take Uncle Sim with you?" inquired Grant.

"No," answered George. "I'll have to leave him to look after the place!"

"How long before we start?" inquired John.

"About three minutes. Are you going with us to-day?"

"You're right I am," declared John. "I stayed home yesterday to make my own investigations in the old Meeker House."

"And you have finished them all?" inquired George with a laugh.

"I can't say that the investigations are all finished, but I am. Yes, sir, I'm done. You don't catch me alone in that old house again."

"But I thought Uncle Sim went with you," suggested Fred.

"Uncle Sim? Uncle Sim? I would rather have an infant in arms with me. Uncle Sim was scared before we were inside the house and after

that everything he saw or heard all helped to scare him still more."

"He surely was scared last night," laughed Fred as he recalled the plight of the aged negro.

"He was that," said John solemnly, "but the worst of it is he scared me too. You know they say that a man doesn't run because he's scared, he's scared because he runs. I don't know much about that, but I guess it worked both ways with me. I know I was scared before I ran and I know I was scared a good deal worse after I began to run."

"Never mind, John," said George. "We'll have a fine ride to-day. We're going up through Ramapo Valley, through that place my father was telling you about where young Montagnie was taken prisoner so many years ago by the cowboys."

"I hope there won't be anybody there to make prisoners of us," declared Grant solemnly. "Do you ever have any hold-ups there now?"

"Not every day," explained George.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Grant as he turned sharply upon George.

"Just what I say," repeated George.

"You don't really think we'll have any trouble, do you?" inquired Fred anxiously.

"I cannot say," said George slowly. "There comes a gentleman now who belongs to the fra-

ternity. Perhaps he can tell you more about it than I." As he spoke the three boys glanced quickly toward the kitchen door. Approaching it was a man who bore every indication of being a tramp.

"Hold on, fellows," whispered Fred, excitedly, "that's the very same tramp I met over in the old Meeker House."

"Sure about that?" asked George quickly.

"Yes, it's the same man."

"Come on, then," said George, "We'll go up and interview him."

The tramp now was seated on the stone step and hungrily was devouring the breakfast which had been given him.

"How long since you have been in the old Meeker House?" inquired Fred as he approached the stranger.

As the man looked up he recognized his companion of the former night and a smile spread over his countenance. "I just came from there," he said.

"Were you in the house all night?" demanded Fred quickly.

"Yes. Why?"

"Did you hear any strange sounds?"

"Not one."

"Didn't you see anything that scared you?"

"No, sir, nothing scared me."

"And you say you were there all night?"

"That's what I say. I crawled in there right after sunset and went to sleep. I told you the other night that I sometimes sleep there in my travels."

"I don't understand why you didn't hear anything," said John, "if you really were in the house. I was there and I heard some things."

"What?" The tramp paused in his occupation and stared blankly at John as he spoke.

"The same things that happen there every night. There were some creatures flying all around the room —"

"Ostriches," said the tramp soberly.

"And there must have been a good many people there too because they called me by my name and at the same time from every part of the house."

"A part of Washington's army," said the tramp.

"I don't know who they were, but the thing that scared me most of all was the tooting of an automobile horn. First it sounded right close to my ear and then it seemed to come from all parts of the house at once."

"Nothing but the wind whistling around the eaves," said the tramp. "I don't mind telling you though that there have been times when I have heard sounds over there that made me think of the horn of an auto —"

"Didn't you hear it last night?" demanded John.

"No. Where are you boys going?" the tramp abruptly added.

"We're going to look for a lost automobile," said Fred. "You haven't seen one lately, have you?"

"Did you lose a car?" inquired the tramp, ignoring the question.

"We certainly have lost it," said George, "or rather somebody has taken it."

"And you know where it is now?"

"We've got word where it may be and we're going to find out."

Fred had been watching the tramp closely throughout the conversation and when George abruptly turned back to the garage he instantly followed him.

CHAPTER XIV

DISAPPOINTED

"I TELL you," exclaimed Fred in a low voice as soon as he had overtaken his friend, "that tramp knows more about the lost automobile than he told us."

George turned abruptly and for a moment stared blankly at his friend and then laughed aloud. "I think you surely have got it," he said. "A fellow who can find spooks and ghosts of automobiles ought to be able to find out a man who will steal them. That tramp to me doesn't look as if he had ever seen the inside of a car."

"It doesn't make any difference," said Fred persistently. "I tell you he knows more about that car than you think."

"What makes you think so?"

"The way he looked and acted when we were talking about the auto having been stolen."

"Did he look guilty?"

"I don't know whether he did or not. He looked up right away and the expression on his face was different from what it was before. He knows

something about it anyway, whether he took it or not."

"Keep it up, Fred," laughed George. "Pretty soon you'll be able to run down every man who has seen our car, to say nothing of those who took it."

"What do you advise me to do?" he continued.

"I don't know."

"That's just it," laughed George. "There are lots of people that can tell you what ought to be done, but there are mighty few that can tell you how to do it. Do you want me to have him arrested?"

"I didn't say that," said Fred. "All I said to you was that he knows more about it than you think he does. It seems to me it would be a good thing to have some one watch him or to leave word with the constable."

"What will the constable do? He can't invite him to his house."

"No, but he can tell him he mustn't leave town, can't he?"

"I don't think he could without a warrant or something. You can't arrest a man merely on suspicion."

"All the same," said Fred, "I think you'll find that he knows more about that lost car than any one else."

"Well," said George, "he doesn't seem to be leaving the country very rapidly and if we hear

of him riding around in a brand new automobile we'll begin to ask some questions. Now, the thing for us to do is to start on our trip and see if there's anything in the report my father has received about the lost car having been found in Newburgh."

A few minutes later the four boys were on their way toward the beautiful little city on the Hudson.

A ride of between forty and fifty miles was before them and they had not gone far on their journey before they were more deeply interested in the sights and scenes they were passing than in the pursuit of the car which had been lost.

While they were riding through the Ramapo Valley they tried to discover the place where young Montagnie had had his troubles with the cowboys who had stopped him. Other stories of heroic deeds by the colonists in the struggle for independence were told by George and Grant and the time passed so rapidly that when the car stopped at Suffern, where the boys were to have their luncheon, with one accord they declared that the ride had been the most enjoyable in all their experience.

Early in the afternoon the ride was resumed and such excellent time was made that by half past three o'clock they had arrived at the end of their journey.

Their car was placed in a garage and then the boys at once went to a hotel where they were to remain that night, for it had been decided that they would not return until the following morning, whether their lost car was found or not.

"Come on, fellows," said George a half-hour afterward, "we'll go down to the garage and see if our car is there."

Down the hill-side on the steep street that led to the bank of the Hudson the boys made their way, frequently commenting on the experiences people of Newburgh must have in winter-time, when ice and snow were to be found on the streets.

George explained that at that time ropes were stretched along the sidewalk to protect the people who tried to pass up or down the slippery way.

"Here we are," explained George a little later as they stopped in front of a large garage. "Come on in. We'll know what out fate is in a few minutes."

Entering the garage George inquired for the manager and soon was in conversation with a young man, who at once became deeply interested in the boys and in the story they were telling him. At last he said, "The car you are talking about is back here in the corner. Come with me and I'll show it to you."

Eagerly following the manager the boys soon stopped in front of the car which he indicated. "You see," explained the young man, "this car has recently been painted. It has a Pennsylvania license, but that could be very easily obtained for they could run over across the Pennsylvania line and then come up into New York State. There are some other changes that have been made, but I want you to look at it and tell me whether or not you think it is the car you have lost."

"I don't think it is," said George promptly.

"Better look at it more closely," said the manager. "Sometimes these cars are created the way they used to tell me the gypsies did when I was a boy. You know they used to scare us by telling us that the gypsies stole children and then they fixed them up so that their own mothers wouldn't recognize them."

"How did they do that?" inquired John.

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose they cut their hair, painted their faces and dressed them up in some outlandish clothes. Well, that's the way these men that steal automobiles sometimes do. They fix them up so that their owners wouldn't recognize the cars as theirs."

A further and careful investigation of the car was made but it was not long before George said positively, "That isn't our car."

"You're sure, are you?" again inquired the manager.

"Yes, sir. I'm sure. The engine isn't like ours. There are more spokes in the wheels and the hood is different. No, I'm sure it's not our car."

George's disappointment was manifest in the tones of his voice and his friends naturally shared in his feelings.

"Was that car stolen?" inquired Fred.

"We suspect that it was," replied the manager. "We have had half a dozen inquiries recently about stolen cars and though I cannot tell you more we have reason to believe that this is one of them. My advice to you is to stop on your way back home at a garage managed by Egge and Hatch."

"What are their names?" demanded Grant blankly.

"Egge and Hatch," repeated the manager. "I know another automobile concern which is run by Waite and Barrett."

"Wait and Bear-it," laughed Fred. "That's a good name. That would do for a lot of other concerns besides garages, wouldn't it?"

"It would be a better name for the men who leave their automobiles there to be repaired," suggested Grant.

The boys were now convinced that the car they

had inspected was not the one they had lost. There was nothing more to be done unless they visited every garage in the city.

"And I don't think there will be much use even in that, just now," suggested the manager.

"Come on then, fellows, we'll go back to the hotel," said George.

"But I don't want to go back to the hotel," said Grant. "I want to go somewhere else."

"Do you know where it is?" demanded John. "I've known you when you started for some place that you didn't know, nor did any one else."

"I know exactly where I want to go," said Grant pompously. "If you fellows want to come with me it will do you good, but if you don't you can do what you please. I have never been in Newburgh before and while I am here I am going to take advantage of the opportunity."

"All right, we'll go with you," said Fred glibly. "If you can find anything that is going to improve you we want to come along and see the show."

CHAPTER XV

A FAMOUS SPOT

UNKNOWN to his friends Grant had made some inquiries concerning a spot in Newburgh which he long had been desirous of seeing. Without explaining to his companions what he had in mind he quickly led the way up another hill until they arrived at a large enclosed yard. In the midst of it stood a low old stone house. In front of the house, on the extensive lawn, were several piles of cannon balls, and cannon were looking out over the peaceful waters of the Hudson. The flag of the United States was floating from the high flagpole and added much to the beauty of the scene.

"What's all this?" demanded John.

"Every young American is supposed to know that this is Washington's headquarters. Didn't you ever hear of it?"

"He had so many," laughed John, "I can't keep track of them. It is something like the beds he slept in that we were talking about the other day."

"Well, this is where he had his headquarters,"

said Grant, "when his army was in this part of the country. This is a beautiful spot, isn't it?"

"It's wonderful!" said Fred in a low voice. The impulsive lad was deeply impressed by the associations connected with the place where they then were standing as well as by the marvelous scene of the Hudson winding its way in and out through the midst of the towering hills.

"Over yonder," said Grant, pointing across the river as he spoke, "is Beacon and right across the river is Fishkill."

"Good name," said John in a low voice.

"Of course it is," said Grant. "We're in the Empire State. That's the State I live in and there isn't another one like it in the Union."

"That's right," said George, who felt that he was now called upon to defend his own State. "New York has a choice collection. I don't say that there aren't some good people here, but you don't have to go very far to come to Ossining. Do you know who lives there?"

"Yes, some undesirable citizens," said Grant.

"Yes, and you go on a little farther up the river and you come to Albany. If you want to know what New York State is like you want to find out how much the capitol building there cost."

"Never mind about those things," broke in John. "What I want to know is about this part of the country where we are now. I have read a

good many stories about the American army when it was in camp at Peekskill."

"Of course you have," said Grant; "there were a lot of things doing there. I have a book at home that my great-grandfather used to read when he was a boy. It tells about a young fellow only seventeen years of age who was one of Washington's couriers. He used to ride between Morristown and Lake Champlain. At least he did in the year when Burgoyne was trying to bring his Hessians and redcoats from Montreal to New York."

"He didn't bring them, though," spoke up Fred quickly.

"Only as far as Saratoga," laughed Grant. "If it hadn't been for certain obstacles I guess he would have brought them all the way down the river."

"I guess he would too," laughed Fred scornfully, "but his 'obstacles,' as you call them, were General Gates, Philip Schuyler, Benedict Arnold and a few other continental soldiers that did not seem to be enthusiastic over allowing Johnnie Burgoyne to come any farther."

"I was reading the other day," said Grant, "that the Baroness de Reidesel was with her husband when the Hessians were captured. She had her children with her and to show them due honor Mrs. General Schuyler took the Baroness and her

children into her own home. The Hessian lady did not know that Mrs. Schuyler understood German and she rudely carried on some conversation with her children in that language when Mrs. Schuyler was present. One time one of the children piped up and asked his mother, 'Isn't this the place that we are to have when our father is made a duke after he has whipped the Yankees?' As the Baroness glanced up she was aware that Mrs. Schuyler had understood what the boy was saying. She tried to apologize but Mrs. Schuyler was a perfect lady and at once smoothed things out. They say she was a brave woman. There's one story about her though that I never believed."

"What was that?" asked John.

"Why they say that thirteen was a magical number for the Americans. The British reported that Martha Washington had a big cat with thirteen stripes around its tail and that she wouldn't have any other kind. There were just thirteen of the colonies, you know, and that made it worse. And it was reported that General Phil. Schuyler had just thirteen hairs left in his bald pate and that Mrs. Catherine Schuyler very carefully oiled and brushed them every night for fear that the magic number might be changed."

"She had better brush his hair than pull it," suggested George.

"I can remember the time," said John, "when

my mother used to brush and pull my hair at the same time."

"So can I," said every one of the boys together.

"Well, the main thing is," said Fred philosophically, "that George Washington had some headquarters and that it's a good thing for the United States of America that he did. I wish we had some men now as great as he was."

"We have," said John quickly.

"We have?" retorted Fred scornfully. "Where are they?"

"Right here," said John solemnly. "Here are four of them. They haven't all arrived yet, but they are on their way."

"Fine lot too," broke in Grant. "Scared so that they run like deer when they hear sounds in the old Meeker House and there isn't one of them that has shown that he has the nerve to stay there long enough to find out just what those strange sounds mean."

"We're not afraid of anything we can see, but it is the things that you can't see that scare us," explained Fred.

"Never mind the Meeker House," said Grant, "I want to take in what this place means. The old cannon balls, the old guns, and the relics we saw inside the house," for the boys had entered the old building and inspected the various relics of revolutionary times that were on exhibition,

"to say nothing about the old Hudson River itself, and the hills, ought to satisfy every one of us for a while, anyway."

"It's a great sight," said George. "I'm glad you brought us up here. I knew Washington's headquarters were here, but it had slipped my mind when we first came. I'm getting hungry. Come on back to the hotel and we'll have our dinner.

The following morning was unusually warm. The boys were early awake, but even then the heat was oppressive.

"Whew," said Fred when they left the dining room, "if it's as hot as this before we start what will it be afterward?"

"That's just like some people," declared John. "They aren't satisfied with the good or the bad they have, but they are always looking ahead for more. There's one thing we don't have to do."

"What's that?" inquired Fred.

"We don't have to swelter before the sun beats down upon us. It will be plenty of time to see what we have to do if we find it so warm on the road that we don't want to go on."

Soon after breakfast the boys started on their homeward ride.

True to its promise the heat steadily increased and a glare that was exceedingly trying to the eyes beat down upon the roadway.

George increased the speed at which he was driving, but the air which fanned their faces was almost like that which comes from a heated oven.

Already the cattle in the nearby fields had sought the shade of the trees in the pastures. The hens in the farmyards also were lying in the shade, their wings partly extended as if they were trying to cool their heated bodies.

"Hens in hot weather," said George, "always make me think they are laughing at us."

"What do you mean?" demanded John. "Who ever heard a hen laugh."

"I didn't say I had heard them laugh, but they have their mouths open."

"Hens don't have mouths, my friend."

"They don't?" demanded George. "Then how do they eat?"

"They have throats and bills and beaks, but they don't have mouths."

"What is a mouth anyway?" said George scornfully. "Isn't it the opening in the head through which one takes food into his stomach?"

"I suppose it is."

"Well, doesn't a hen swallow corn?"

"She does."

"Then she has a mouth, hasn't she?"

"Wait a minute and I'll tell you. It's this way, you see —"

At that moment there was a loud report directly

beneath the car which at that time was passing under a stone bridge.

George instantly stopped the car, but another driver directly in front of him was so startled by the unexpected sound that he lost control of his automobile and swung into the ditch, nearly overturning his car as he did so. Instantly rising from his seat he turned and glared at the Go Ahead boys as if he was tempted to visit some merited punishment upon them.

The boys, however, were so busy with their own troubles that they ignored the anger of the driver before them. Instantly leaping from their seats they began their investigations.

Only a brief time, however, was required to disclose the cause of the trouble. "A blowout," said George disgustedly. "It's torn that tube all into shreds."

"You blew it up too tight," suggested Grant.

"Thank you," said George as he took off his coat, "you're so well informed about these matters that I think I'll let you help me put a new tire on."

CHAPTER XVI

ANOTHER LOSS

THE angry stranger, who by this time had recovered from his surprise, speedily departed. Indeed, the fact that the boys had had only a slight conversation with him perhaps increased his anger and as soon as his car had been pulled from the ditch, a task in which all joined to help, he soon afterward disappeared from sight.

The intense heat soon caused the faces of the boys to be shining with perspiration. The dust from the road also did its part until in the streaked countenances of the Go Ahead boys even their own mothers would have had difficulty in recognizing members of their families.

The difficult task and the heat of the day also united in increasing the irritation of the boys. There were several remarks made which happily were soon forgotten or ignored.

In the midst of the task the jack broke and the wheel dropped upon the ground.

"There you have it!" exclaimed George irrita-

bly. "A broken jack! No tube! Seventeen miles from nowhere and not a crumb to eat!"

"Never mind, George," said John good-naturedly. "Somebody will be coming along pretty soon and will lend us a hand."

"He will have to lend us a jack, I guess if we ever get anywhere. I don't know what is the matter with this thing," he added as again he examined the broken implement.

"There's nothing for us to do except wait," suggested Grant. "Come up here in the shade, fellows. We'll have to join that man who is sitting there."

As Grant spoke he pointed toward a bank or knoll near the roadside where a man was seen reclining on the ground beneath the shade of some huge maple trees.

"That's a good suggestion," declared Fred, and in a brief time the boys were seated on the ground, enjoying the relief from the heat of the burning sun.

Their only hope now rested upon some friendly driver stopping to aid them.

To the amazement of Fred, as well as of his companions, the man whom they discovered enjoying the shade was none other than the tramp who had first been seen in the old Meeker House.

He stared a moment at the unexpected sight and then as a grin spread over the countenance of

the man he was convinced that his first impression had been correct. The tramp of the Meeker House was there before him. How he had come there, so far from the place where he had been first seen, was a mystery.

"You seem to have had bad luck, my friends," laughed the tramp, as he sat erect when the boys approached.

"Yes, the day is so hot," growled George, "that the tube burst. We had a blowout. We had it blown up too much anyway when we left Newburgh."

"Have you been to Newburgh?" inquired the tramp.

"Yes," replied George shortly.

"Did you find your car?"

"No."

"That's too bad." If the tramp, however, had any real sympathy for the boys in their loss his countenance failed to reflect the feeling, for he was still grinning at his young companions. "Not much use," he continued. "There must be seventy-five or a hundred thousand autos in Jersey alone, and when you stop to think of all that are in New York and Pennsylvania you will see you stand mighty little chance of ever finding your own car."

"Thank you," said George. "You needn't be worried though, for we are going to get it."

"What are you doing up here?" demanded Fred.

"Why I got to thinking of it last night," explained the tramp, "after you boys left home and the more I thought about it the more I thought I would like to come up into this part of the world too. You haven't any objection to my coming?" he added quizzically.

"Oh, no, not the slightest," said Fred glibly. "I was just wondering how a man as weary as you are could have made such good time. You must have come forty miles or more. How did you do it?"

"Part of the way," replied the tramp, "I came in an empty box-car. I got a lift with an old man who was taking a load of produce to market and another man gave me a ride in his automobile. I don't think I have walked all together more than half a mile. There's always somebody that is good to the halt, the blind, the lame,—"

"And the lazy," joined in Fred.

"I guess that's right," said the tramp. "But I'm not to blame for it. I don't like to work. It's the way I was born, and if I don't like it I don't see why I should do it, do you?"

"Not as long as some one else is willing to work and get you something to eat and wear," suggested George tartly.

"I guess you're right again," drawled the

tramp. "If the time ever comes when there isn't anybody to do that for me, then I guess I'll have to go to work. But I'm putting it off as long as possible. Hello," he added quickly, "there comes a car," pointing as he spoke toward an automobile which was swiftly approaching.

George ran speedily down to the road and hailed the approaching car.

The automobile was stopped as the signal was discovered, and for the first time George was conscious of his dust-discolored face, for seated in the back seat was a young girl with her mother. She laughed as she saw George's countenance and even her mother's face could not conceal the quizzical expression that appeared when George spoke.

"We had a blowout here," explained George, "and when we tried to put on a new tube our jack broke. Can you help us out?"

"Certainly," said the woman. "James, you help these young gentlemen," she added as she turned to her chauffeur.

The other boys now turned and offered their assistance to George, although Grant and John plainly were more interested in the occupants of the friendly car than they were in the task immediately confronting them.

"There's no use, boys," said the chauffeur at last. "That blowout must have been a big one."

"It was," spoke up Fred quickly.

"It has bent your rim. You never can get a new tire on that until it has been fixed."

"What shall we do?" inquired George blankly.

"The best thing I can suggest is for you to get in our car and we will take you to a good garage about four miles up the road. They will have to come back here in another car so you won't have to walk."

"That's a good suggestion," said George quickly as he prepared to accept the invitation.

His zeal, however was quickly shared by two of his friends, who insisted that their presence also was required. "You see," Fred explained, "if they cannot help us at that garage, why some of us will have to go on to another. We cannot leave our car here all day in the sun."

John was the only one of the party left behind and as it was deemed necessary for some one to remain with the car he volunteered for that service.

The task confronting him was not difficult, however, and John soon was reclining once more in a shaded spot near the tramp who was still seated in the same place he had first been seen.

In spite of John's efforts to draw the man into conversation the tramp was strangely silent most of the time. At last, however, his mood changed and turning to John he said, "Your friends ought to be back here by this time."

"They may have had trouble in getting a car right away to bring them back."

"Well, they will be here pretty soon," said the tramp. "I think I'll go up to that orchard up yonder," he added as he pointed to a hillside covered with apple trees about one hundred yards distant.

"Are there any apples there ripe?" inquired John quickly.

"Plenty of them. Plenty of them. The owner doesn't seem to care anything about them. He hasn't sprayed his trees or pruned them for years, but there are some juicy red apples in the corner of the orchard and they are mighty good. I know for I have tried them already."

"Wait a minute and I'll go up with you," said John.

Together they made their way up the side of the hill and John speedily discovered that the statement of his companion was correct. The ground beneath the trees was carpeted with a layer of red apples tempting in their size and appearance.

"I think I'll take back a few for the other fellows," said John, as he filled his cap. "I would like to pay for them, but I don't see anybody around here."

"Nobody pays for these apples," explained the tramp. "The owner of the farm spent a lot of

money on his place and then got tired of it and went back to the city. He left everything here to go to pieces."

"That's a pity," said John as he climbed over the fence and started back toward the place where they had left the automobile.

"Where is our car?" demanded John in consternation as he drew near the place from which they had started.

In amazement he looked up and down the road, but not a trace of the automobile was to be seen.

"What do you suppose has happened to that car?" he demanded, again turning to his companion.

"I don't know unless it has evaporated," said the tramp. "It's a pretty hot day."

"Evaporated nothing!" explained John angrily. "The car is gone. I don't know what George and the fellows will say. We have lost two cars now instead of one. I don't understand how it could have been taken away without our knowing it."

"That isn't nearly so important," suggested the tramp, "as the fact that it is gone. There isn't any car here."

CHAPTER XVII

LEFT BEHIND

"I THINK the men from the garage may have come and taken the car away," suggested the tramp.

"That may be the way it is," said John, relieved by the suggestion. A moment later, however, the thought occurred to him that in the event of the return of the boys with a man from the garage, in all probability some of them would have remained and not all have gone back with him. In that case his companions must be near, but as he looked up and down the road he did not discover any trace of his friends.

"They will be back here by and by," said the tramp encouragingly. "It won't take very long to straighten that rim and put on a new shoe. The best thing for you to do is to stay right here until they come."

"I don't see much else to do," said John, still far from being persuaded that an explanation of the missing car was to be found in the suggestion made by his strange companion. "I guess I'll just have to wait."

"If you do, then you might as well wait comfortably." As he spoke the tramp again sought the shaded place on the bank above the road, and seated on the ground, with his back against a tree, he at once began to feast upon the apples he had brought from the orchard.

Following his example John speedily climbed the little knoll and quickly seated himself in a similar manner against a nearby tree.

"We can see up and down the road here," said the tramp, "and if your friends come you'll know it long before they are here."

For some reason John lost his desire to talk to the strange man. He was continually looking up the road in the direction in which the boys had disappeared when they had departed in the friendly car. A half-hour passed and only two automobiles were seen on the dusty road. The heat seemed to increase as the noon-hour approached. There was no habitation within sight at which a luncheon might be obtained and John now began to feel hungry as well as anxious.

He was by no means satisfied that George's car had been taken to the garage by the boys. Indeed, his fear that the second car had been stolen was steadily increasing and he was blaming himself, as not unnaturally he believed George would blame him if the car had indeed been taken.

When an hour had passed a car was seen ap-

proaching which the tramp quickly declared belonged to a garage in a neighboring village. "I know that car," he said confidently, "for I have worked in that shop."

"Do you know anything about automobiles?" demanded John quickly.

"Not very much, but then one doesn't have to know very much to work in a place like that. I used to look wise and hammer a lot and then charge still more. I have made up my mind that if ever I have to work again I'm going to find a job in an automobile shop. The hardest thing you have to do is to make out your bills."

"That may be so," said John, smiling as he spoke, "though I hope it won't prove to be the case this time. There are the boys in that car," he added quickly, as he recognized his three friends approaching. The car was driven by a man in his shirt sleeves and the speed at which he was moving proclaimed the fact that either he was an expert driver or one of the most reckless of men.

A few minutes later the automobile was stopped in front of John, who now ran down into the road to greet the returning boys.

"Where's the car, Jack?" inquired Grant quickly.

"I don't know," said John.

"You don't know! Weren't you here in charge of it?"

"I have been here all the time except about five minutes when I went up into the orchard yonder and got some apples. When I came back the car was gone. This man," he added, pointing to the tramp as he spoke, "said he thought you had come from the garage and taken the car back with you."

"Whew!" whistled Fred. "This is getting exciting. First you lose one car and then you lose another. I think we'll have to go back to the old Meeker House and look for its ghost."

"I don't see anything funny in this," said Grant in disgust. "Here we are at least four miles from the railroad. We know how hot and dusty the road is and we don't want—"

"You fellows are a sympathetic crowd," broke in George. "You're thinking about your own comfort all the while and not a word about my losses. It's bad enough to have one car stolen to say nothing of two."

"Do you think this second car has been stolen?" demanded Fred abruptly, turning upon his friend as he spoke.

"Well, it's gone, isn't it?" said George.

"Yes, it's gone," admitted Fred, "but that doesn't mean it has been stolen."

"Well, tell me what has become of it then? Where is it? Show me the car."

"I can't do it," said Fred. "I wish I could. But I don't believe that car has been stolen."

"What do you think?" demanded George, turning to the mechanic as he spoke.

"I haven't heard of a car being stolen up here in a long time, and I don't see how anybody could have taken that car away without being seen if he was trying to steal it."

"That's all true enough," said George angrily. "I know all those things, but tell me if you can where my car is. I don't see how anybody could have taken it away from here with the shoe being in the condition that it was. I never saw such a blowout in my life."

"Perhaps we can track it," suggested Grant.

"That's right. That's just what we can do," said George eagerly. "Look here," he added, as he pointed to a place near the road where the imprint of the mutilated tire plainly could be seen.

It was possible to follow this track a few yards, but there the trail ceased, the car apparently had been brought up again on the hard roadbed and no trace was left of its passage.

"What's become of your tramp?" demanded George, suddenly turning upon John.

All four boys quickly looked about them, but the tramp had disappeared from sight.

"That's one of the strangest things I ever heard of," said Fred. "That tramp knew how you lost the other car and I guess he could tell some things about this one too, if he wanted to."

"He was with me all the time," spoke up John quickly. "I never lost sight of him a minute."

"It's a pity you didn't do as well with the car," said Grant.

"Well, the tramp and I went up into the orchard together. We were together all the while we were there and we came back together. When we got back here we saw that the car was gone. The tramp was here. Now will you please tell me how a tramp could steal an automobile and still be with me all the while?"

"What do you think is the best thing for us to do?" said George, turning to the mechanic.

"Your car isn't here," said the man, "and you could track it a little way, far enough to see that it was taken in that direction," he explained as he pointed ahead of him. "Now that's right on the way back to the garage and my advice is for all four of you to get into the car and we'll see what we can find on the way back. If you don't find anything we can telephone when you get into the village, or you can leave on the train. There's one out in about an hour and a half."

The suggestion finally was adopted and all four boys maintained a careful outlook for the missing

car throughout their ride to the garage. However no trace of the missing automobile was discovered. The car had disappeared and the boys were stranded in a little village in northern New Jersey.

Leaving his companions, George telephoned his father. The conversation lasted several minutes and when at last George rejoined his friends he said glumly, "My father says the best thing for us to do is to come home by train. He told us to look out and not lose the train."

"I guess," laughed Grant, "it would be a little more expensive for him if we should lose the train than to have us lose the cars."

"If we keep this up much longer," said Fred, "we'll have a good big bill to pay. I never knew anybody in my life that ever had a car stolen and here we lose two inside of a week."

"You must remember," said John soberly, "that we are the Go Ahead boys. It doesn't make any difference what we start in we have got to leave the rest of them behind us. If it's looking for smugglers or digging for a pirate's chest or having our automobiles stolen, it doesn't make a particle of difference which, we are bound to go ahead, get ahead and keep ahead."

"I'm glad to hear you talk that way," said George grimly. "I have been looking in my pockets to see if I have money enough to get a ticket home. Have any of you got money?"

"I'll take up a collection," suggested John, seizing his cap as he spoke. The result of his efforts, however, when the sum was counted, was not quite sufficient to purchase the tickets required by the four boys on their return trip.

"I don't see anything for us to do," said Fred glibly, "except to leave String here. He's the one who is responsible for the loss of the car to-day and if anybody has to stay behind I think he ought to be the one."

"I agree with you," said John meekly. "I'm willing to stay, for I confess I would like to find out what has become of that lost car."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ARRIVAL

IN spite of the protests of the other boys against John being left behind, it was finally decided that he should carry out his own plan. He had declared his purpose to find out if possible what had become of the second car.

George had insisted that all four of the Go Ahead boys either should remain together or depart in a body; but after a brief conversation in which John explained that he really was desirous of making some further investigations of his own and also that it was equally important for George to get into touch with his father, as he could not do over the telephone, it was agreed that John should remain until the following day. A very attractive hotel not far from the station was most inviting. There John explained he would remain until the following day when the boys either would come for him or send him money.

Only a few moments elapsed before the noisy train proclaimed its coming. The scream of the locomotive was echoed and re-echoed in the nearby valley and long before its arrival at the station

the people of the little village were aware that the one o'clock train was "on time."

Again George protested strongly against John being left behind, although he did not explain how he was to ride on the train without a ticket nor how he was to obtain a ticket without any money. However, in a few minutes the three departing boys, standing on the rear platform of the last car, were waving their hats as they bade good-by to the fourth member of the Go Ahead boys who was watching them from the platform of the station.

Slowly John turned into the walk that led him from the little station to the main street of the village. As he came out upon the sidewalk he was startled when he heard himself addressed by his own name. Surprised, he glanced in the direction from which the unexpected hail had come and he was amazed to behold the tramp, who had been his companion in the morning, now seated in the missing automobile. Evidently he had been driving the car but the expression on his face as John ran toward him did not indicate his purpose to explain the sight which had so startled him.

"Where did you get that car?" demanded John sharply as he stared at the driver.

"I found it at the other garage," explained the tramp.

"How did it get there?"

"Why, there was another blowout right near

where you had yours this morning. I guess it must be the same fellow that you scared or drove into a ditch; at least that's what he said. He couldn't fix his car because the rim was torn into pieces and he got a lift back to this garage and sent some men out to get his car."

"And they got ours?" demanded John delightedly.

"That's what it seems," replied the tramp quietly. "I suspected there might be some trouble of the kind so I went around there and sure enough I found this car just as I half expected to. Your friends have cleared out and left you, have they?"

"They have gone back home," explained John.

"Well, that's all right. We'll beat them there yet. You get in and I'll see what time I can make."

"You're sure you know how to drive?" inquired John. "Because if you don't know how I can do something at it myself."

"My 'deah boy,' " lisped the tramp, "don't distress your little heart about my being able to drive the car. You get in here and if you have any fault to find I'll resign and let you take the wheel."

"We ought to have something to eat," said John, "but I haven't a cent of money."

"So I understand. It took all the money there was in the crowd to buy tickets for three boys."

"How did you know?"

"Never mind that. I knew you didn't have any money and I knew too that I would have to furnish what we needed on our trip. I managed to get together twenty-three cents. I think that's just the amount one ought to have when he is leaving in a hurry, don't you?" laughed the tramp.

"That's all right."

"Well, I took my twenty-three cents and went over to the grocery store and I bought some cheese and a box of crackers. You get in and feed up on the way back. If you're like me you'll think you've had a dinner fit for a king."

As he spoke the tramp held up to view the purchases he had made and John instantly responded to his appeal and took his seat in front beside the driver. The hungry boy declared that he never had tasted food he enjoyed more. Meanwhile the car was driven steadily forward on its way. And if John had had any misgivings as to the ability of his companion as a driver they were soon dispelled. It was plain that the man was an expert at his task.

"Where did you learn to drive a car?"

"I didn't have to learn," said the tramp. "I always knew. I have driven cars ever since they were first made. If I need any money I get a job as a chauffeur and then after I have got some money I don't need any job and quit."

John laughed as he said, "You're the strangest man I ever saw."

"That's what others have told me."

"I don't see why a man with the brains you have doesn't do something worth while. What do you want to be beating around the country for without any home and staying nights in such places as the old Meeker House?"

"I have often wondered myself," replied the tramp quietly. "I don't know that there's any answer to your question. Speaking of the old Meeker House, have you heard anything more about the strange noises over there?"

"Not since I saw you," replied John.

"Well, my advice to you is to take your friends over there to-night and I suspect you'll have an experience that will interest you."

"What is it?" demanded John, interested at once.

"I'm not sure just what it will be so I cannot explain, but if you want to see your friends stirred up you take them over there after you have had your dinner to-night. By the way, do you think there will be any reward for finding this car?"

"Knowing Mr. Sanders as I do, I'm quite sure there will be."

"I have brought the bill in my pocket for the repairs at the garage."

"How much did they charge?"

"Fifty-three cents and the man apologized for the size of his bill. That's one of the things they haven't learned up here in the country yet."

"I have never found any one who didn't know how to charge," laughed John.

"Well, this man didn't seem to know much about it, so I paid his bill and had just twenty-three cents left, as I told you. I think if Mr. Sanders wants to pay that bill I shall let him."

"I certainly know he will," said John. "I know he will insist upon it anyway for he's that kind of a man."

The automobile was making most excellent time and long before it was possible for his companions to arrive John had turned into the driveway that led to George's home.

The tramp had insisted upon leaving the car before it had turned in, explaining that he would return when Mr. Sanders came and if the latter "sufficiently urged" him to accept a reward he would do so willingly.

John laughed as the strange man departed and then drove up to the house.

Uncle Sim was the first to greet him and after staring blankly at John for a moment he said, "Whar de other boys?"

"They are coming later," said John. "They are coming on the train."

"Wha' fo'?"

"Oh, they will have to tell you," said John. "Just as soon as I can wash up I want to go over to the station and bring them home. They'll come in probably on the next train."

True to his word a half-hour later John was waiting in the automobile near the station. He had pictured to himself the excitement of his friends when they should arrive and discover him in the lost automobile, awaiting their coming.

John's meditations were interrupted by the prolonged blast by which the coming of the train was made known. So pleased was he over the prospect that he laughed aloud. The arrival of the train, however, soon caused him to watch the alighting passengers and as soon as he discovered his friends among the number, in his loudest tones he shouted, "George, tell all the Go Ahead boys to come over here!"

Startled by the unexpected hail the three boys turned and for a moment stared blankly at John. All the latter's hopes were more than fulfilled. Surprise and incredulity were stamped upon the faces of the three Go Ahead boys.

"Where did you get that car?" demanded George, hastily approaching.

"Why, it is your car, isn't it?" said John meekly.

"Sure it is, but where did you get it?"

"Why, after you fellows left me over there

where you took the train I thought you would like to have me look up your car, so that's what I have done, but you don't seem to be very thankful. This is an ungrateful world, and a naughty deed arouses more interest than a good one. At least I think that's what Shakespeare says."

"Shakespeare?" broke in Fred sharply. "You never got as far as the title page."

"That may all be," retorted John. "All I mean to say now is that this car is for the exclusive use of those who are accustomed to move in polite society." As he spoke John turned on the power and despite the efforts of his friends to overtake him soon was moving rapidly over the road.

CHAPTER XIX

AN INVITATION

APPEARING to ignore his friends John drove rapidly around the circle which had been laid out between the station and the main street. Proudly returning to the place on the platform where his friends were awaiting his coming, he called out, "How's this car? How's the driver? Pretty slick, eh?"

"What we don't know," said George quickly, "is where the driver came from and how he got the car."

"You'll have to trust your Uncle John for some things," replied the driver solemnly. "There are some things you can't explain and some things it's hard for certain people to understand. You see that your car's here, don't you?"

"Yes," replied George.

"It's all right, isn't it?"

"As far as I can see."

"Cylinders all sound? Tires all complete? Boiler intact? Carbureter still working? Limousine all ready to be carved?"

"That's right," said George, laughing as he

spoke. "As far as I can see everything is all straight except the fact that you didn't tell us how you got the car and beat us back here."

"Get in, fellows, and I'll tell you about it on the way back," said John. "I'll resign my position as chauffeur too," he added, as he quickly moved to another seat.

"I don't mind; stay where you are," said George cordially.

"No, I know you don't 'mind,' but this is a hot day. I would rather sit behind and tell you how to do it."

"All right then, I'll go ahead," said George, as he started the car. "Tell us how you did it."

"I have already explained to the best of my ability," said John soberly.

"Tell us again, then," broke in Fred.

"Why, all there is to it is that after you fellows left I looked around for the car and found it."

"Did you find it alone?"

"What do you mean,—was I the only one that found it, or do you mean that I found the car all by itself?"

"My, how correct some fellows are in their talk," murmured Fred. "Yes, what I mean was were you all alone when you found the car?"

"No."

"Well, why don't you tell us who was with you?" demanded Grant irritably.

"The tramp," said John abruptly.

"The tramp!" repeated the boys together.

"That's what I said."

"Tell us about it," said George.

"Why, after you fellows cleared out and left me behind, for you remember that you took all the tickets there were and left me up there sans money, sans ticket, sans everything, as Shakespeare says—"

"We don't remember anything of the kind," interrupted George. "We tried to get you to come along."

"Yes, you did!" laughed John scornfully. "You tried hard. You had just money enough to buy three tickets and I was generous enough to say that I would let you three fellows use them—"

"Go on with your story about the tramp," interrupted Fred.

"Well, I'll tell you the truth," said John.

"Hope it won't make you too tired," murmured Fred.

"I'm telling you the truth," said John, glaring at his diminutive companion as he spoke. "The train hadn't fairly gotten out of sight with you fellows on board before up comes the tramp, driving this car. He came right up to the platform of the station and invited me to get on board. You may be sure I didn't stand on the form, or likewise on the platform, very long."

"Where did he get it?" demanded George.

"He suspected what had happened," explained John, "and he said he went to another garage, hoping that there had been some mistake. He said there were two cars in trouble out there on the road, one besides ours. The men that came out from the shop made a mistake and I guess each car was taken to the wrong garage."

"That's a pretty good story," laughed George.

"Well, it's all right," declared John warmly. "Here's your car anyway. The tramp brought it, just as I'm telling you, and you haven't anything to say about it."

"Maybe the tramp took the car and got scared when he saw us start off. Probably he thought we were going for help."

"Probably nothing!" exclaimed John disgustedly. "I tell you that tramp is all right. He can speak the English language and he has got some brains. I asked him to-day what he was tramping around the country for and he said he didn't know."

"He must have a lot of brains," ejaculated Fred.

"He knows how to drive a car all right," said John. "He drove all the way home."

"Where is he now?" demanded George.

"I don't know. He wouldn't stay. By the way, he did suggest before he departed that if there was

any reward connected with the finding of the car he wouldn't mind taking it."

"Probably he wouldn't," laughed Fred.

"I think he is entitled to something," said George, "and I'll tell my father about it the first time he comes out."

"Where did the tramp go?"

"He didn't tell me," explained John, "but I think he went over to the old Meeker House. He said that if we wanted to see something worth while and something that would beat anything we had ever experienced in the old Meeker House we had better come over there after dinner."

"To-night?" inquired Fred.

"Yes, to-night."

"I say we go," said Grant quickly.

"So say we all," added George.

In a brief time the car was running swiftly up the driveway of the yard and as soon as his companions alighted George took it to the garage.

The other missing car, however, had not been returned nor had any word been received concerning it during the absence of the boys.

A call on the telephone speedily demanded George's attention and as soon as he rejoined his friends he said, "I have been talking to my father."

"You mean your father has been talking to you," suggested Fred.

Ignoring the interruption, George continued, "My father says that he has word of a car that is being held in Morristown. In some ways it answers the description of ours. He thinks it will be a good thing for us to go there to-morrow and find out more about it."

"Good plan. Good scheme," said Fred sympathetically. "Did your father say anything about suitably rewarding the tramp for his return of the car which he probably had all the while?"

"He did," said George simply. "He told me to give him a ten dollar bill."

"That's all right," said Fred eagerly. "Now I think it will be a good thing for each of us to take his turn, too," he added. "Every one of us can take that car off and hide it over night and get ten dollars reward when he brings it back in the morning. That's all your friend Mr. Tramp did."

"That's no such thing!" spoke up John, quick to defend his recent acquaintance.

"You may have it your own way," laughed Fred. "Then we're to go over and call on him to-night at the old Meeker House, are we?"

"That's just what we are going to do," said John.

True to the suggestion, soon after sunset the Go Ahead boys rode to the mysterious house. When they left their car by the roadside and started

across the intervening field it was plain that there was an air of greater confidence now manifest by all four boys than in any previous visit.

The moon already had risen and in its clear light the old apple trees and the poplars that lined the driveway appeared like aged sentinels, twisted and gnarled. Indeed, some of the objects assumed fantastic forms and as the boys advanced, a silence not unlike that which had rested upon them in their former visits now fell over the party.

"I'll tell you one thing," spoke up Fred in a loud whisper; "I'm going with George around to the kitchen this trip."

"I haven't invited you," replied George promptly.

"It doesn't make any difference whether you have or not, I'm going just the same," said Fred.

"Then I shall have to put up with it," responded George in mock resignation. "All I can say to the rest of you is that whatever you do don't run. Let's find out what this thing means this time. Do you agree?"

"Yes, we agree," replied his friends.

"Good," responded George. "Now don't forget."

The boys at once separated, George and Fred moving around to the rear of the house while John and Grant approached the front door, which already was a familiar sight.

Without waiting for their companions to enter they at once pushed open the door, which creaked on its rusty hinges, producing sounds not unlike the cry of a child in distress.

Inside the room there again was the sound of many rushing wings. Indeed, for a moment, to the boys, who were startled in spite of their determination to be calm, the room seemed to be filled with flying creatures. Weird sounds also were heard and low spoken cries that were not unlike the creaking of the hinges of the old door.

In spite of their recently expressed courage both boys stopped as if by common consent. As they did so the sound of voices, speaking in whispers, was heard from other parts of the house. No person, however, was visible and in the dim light that penetrated the room neither of the boys was able to see any object distinctly.

Meanwhile the flapping of the unseen wings continued. Suddenly there was a flash of light that was almost blinding. It was so unexpected that both boys together and almost instantly turned toward the door. A cloud of smoke swept through the room and both boys, coughing and choking, instantly turned and fled from the house. Their speed increased as there came sounds of loud laughter from within the ancient dwelling. Unmindful of their promise not to run, both boys

instantly turned and quickly were making most excellent time across the field in the direction of the automobile, which still could be seen in the open road.

CHAPTER XX

THE FATHER OF HIS COUNTRY

WHEN John and Grant climbed into their seats in the waiting automobile both were nearly breathless. Before either of them spoke there came another loud burst of laughter from the house of mystery, and a moment later Fred and George were seen approaching. Both were running but neither apparently had been as greatly alarmed by the occurrences in the old Meeker House as had their two friends.

"I thought you fellows were not going to run," said Fred as he seated himself.

"We thought the place was being bombarded," explained John. "I noticed that you didn't stay very long either."

"We had to come out and find what had made you fellows run so fast," said George.

"That's all right," said John. "I'm willing to go back there now if you are."

Fred hesitated a moment, but as George had now seated himself and the car was under motion and there was slight prospect of turning back,

in his boldest tones he said, "I'm perfectly willing to go back. I wasn't scared to-night anyway."

"Come on, then," said John, rising as he spoke.

George, however, ignored the conversation and increasing the speed at which the car was moving soon left the corner far behind him.

When the Go Ahead boys arrived at the farmhouse neither John nor Grant had much to say concerning their recent experience. The blinding flash which they described had been seen also by their companions, but both George and Fred declared that they had not been frightened by the unexpected occurrence.

There was no possibility of denying the fact that John and Grant had fled much more precipitately than had their companions, although there had been no great difference in the time of their return to the waiting automobile.

For some reason conversation flagged and not many references were made to the mysteries of the old Meeker House which still were unexplained.

"To-morrow morning," said George, "you understand that we are to go to Morristown. Are we all going?"

"We are," replied his friends together.

"I didn't know but John would like to stay behind and make some further investigations," laughed George.

"No, sir. I'm not going to be left this time," explained John. "I want to see Morristown. I have heard so much about the place that I want to see it for myself."

"It's well worth seeing," said George.

The following morning directly after breakfast, the Go Ahead boys were speeding swiftly toward the beautiful Jersey town which was to be their destination. The ride across the rolling country, with its frequent streams and hills and villages, was most attractive. Many beautiful homes, erected by the people of the great city beyond the borders of the state, added much to the beauty of the scenery.

However, the enthusiasm of the boys reached its highest point when at last they arrived at Morristown. The combination of age with the best that the thought of modern times could accomplish in the architecture of the houses was most impressive. Beautiful homes, many of which had extensive lawns and shade trees and the many evidences of thrift and prosperity to be seen on every side, were most attractive.

The first duty of the boys, however, was to visit the garage to which they had been directed by George's father. Here, however, again their efforts proved unavailing. The missing car was not found. An automobile of the same make and concerning which there was some question of owner-

ship was still in the garage, but the Go Ahead boys speedily decided that they had no claim to its possession.

"I don't believe we'll ever find the car," said Fred despondently when the boys departed from the garage.

"I guess you have forgotten our name," suggested John. "We are the Go Ahead boys, not the Give Up boys."

"That's all right," spoke up George, "but just now I am going to show you some of the sights of this old historic town."

"Did Washington sleep here?" inquired Fred demurely.

"He lived here for a while," explained George, "but the British tried to find out whether he was asleep or not. They never found him asleep."

"Still I suppose he did sleep sometimes."

"When was he here?" inquired John.

"Why, don't you know the history of your own country?" spoke up Fred. "Washington came here after the battle of Princeton. That winter was a hard one for the little colonial army. People have talked about Valley Forge just as if there wasn't as much suffering at Morristown. I don't know why it is that people start on one line and then forget there are any others."

"He was here twice," explained Grant. "That

winter of '77 and '78 and then too in the winter of '78 and '79."

"Yes," said George. "The house which is called Washington's Headquarters is where he lived during his second winter. I'm going to take you first," he added, "out to Washington Valley. That's where the most of the soldiers camped."

In a brief time the Go Ahead boys gained the summit of the hill from which they were able to look down upon the marvelously beautiful valley before them. It was like a great bowl among the hills. The rich and cultivated fields and beautiful homes on the hillsides and the nature of the place itself combined to make a most beautiful as well as interesting picture.

"It looks almost as if it was built for an army to hide in," said Grant.

"They were pretty well protected here," explained George. "You see, the hills were as good as forts. Now we'll go back to Washington's headquarters," he added, as he turned around and started once more back toward Morristown.

Not far from the public square the boys found the famous building. Built of brick and covered with boards and shingles, its sides painted white, it produced not merely an impression of age, but also of freshness as well.

"Then this is where the father of his country stayed, is it?" said Fred. "Just look at this

picture," he added as he pointed toward the house and then turned around to George and said, "then look at this. We have fallen from that to this, Washington was the father of his country and G. Washington Sanders is just 'Pop'."

"That's all right," replied George, joining in the laugh of his friends. "I'll admit that Pop isn't the biggest word in the language any more than Pyg is."

"Quit this," demanded Grant. "We're going into the old house and you will have to behave yourselves."

The visit proved to be most interesting. Many articles that had been used when Washington was living in the house and many more which had been contributed were on exhibition. Indeed, as the boys passed from room to room they became more subdued in their manner, for somehow the knowledge that they were looking upon the same sights that had greeted the great commander had produced a marked effect. Even the old cannon on the lawn and the piles of cannon balls had stories of their own.

The silence, however, was broken when the boys resumed their seats in the automobile.

"I wonder why Washington stayed so far away from his army," suggested John.

"He had a body guard here all the time," explained Grant. "There were about two hundred

and fifty men stationed here. They used to call them the life guard."

"What did they do?" inquired Fred.

"It was a special guard to protect General Washington. You see the red coats and Hessians, as I told you, tried a good many times to catch Washington asleep. Sometimes they crossed over from Staten Island and came up through Springfield, trying to catch the 'old fox' off his guard. But the people all through the country knew just what to do. They had guns or little cannon mounted on several of the hills and whenever word came that the redcoats were coming the boys fired one cannon and that would be heard by other people and the guns on the other hills would be fired too so that the soldiers at Morristown knew long before the British could arrive that they were trying to advance."

"But they never got him," said Fred gleefully.

"It wasn't because they didn't try hard enough," laughed George. "My grandfather used to tell me that when the soldiers at Morristown heard the 'old sow,' which was the name of one of the guns, they understood right away that there was danger of an attack. Everything in the old house was shut up except the windows, and then five of the continentals took their stand at every window and were ready to fire upon any one that came near the place."

"I would like to have seen Washington," said John thoughtfully.

"They say," said George, "that he was about as tall as you are, String, but he had some breadth and thickness as well as length. He weighed about two hundred pounds. All the time he was at Morristown he was very quiet. I fancy he was worried all the while. That didn't prevent him from being very strict with his soldiers, however. He issued an order that there should be no gambling or swearing, that nobody should be permitted to do any stunts on Sunday, and the men who disobeyed didn't forget the lesson taught them."

"Why, what did Washington do?" inquired Fred.

"He had guilty soldiers whipped in the presence of their companies. A man would be tied up to a tree and then the drummers or fifers would have to lash him. Sometimes they got forty blows, sometimes more. One time a soldier who had disobeyed orders about poaching and had stolen a pig from a poor farmer was reported to the commander. Washington had him whipped with more than a double dose. They say that the men did not make any complaint though, and even when they were going through the performance every man used to take a lead cartridge between his teeth and bite hard on it whenever he was struck a blow."

"I guess that's one reason why Washington was so popular," suggested John thoughtfully.

"It's an easy way to become popular," laughed Fred.

"Never you mind," retorted George. "You know just as well as I do that no fellow likes a teacher that is not strict. My father says that the man or boy who tries to be popular never is."

"And your father is dead right too," said Grant quickly, turning to his friend.

"Yes, sir, he's all right," responded John.

CHAPTER XXI

AN EXPLANATION IN PART

IT was the middle of the afternoon when the Go Ahead boys returned to George's home. Apparently they had not been cast down by their failure to obtain information concerning the missing car. Indeed, as one of the boys laughingly remarked, George was the only one deeply and personally concerned in the loss and if he did not feel discouraged there certainly was no reason why his friends should be despondent.

On the broad piazza of the old farmhouse the boys sat for a half-hour talking over the experiences of the day. Different suggestions were made as to possible plans that might be adopted in the search for the stolen automobile.

"I'm not thinking so much about the car as I am about what we saw to-day at Morristown," said Grant thoughtfully. "I feel almost as if I had stepped right back into the eighteenth century."

"My friend," said Fred soberly, "that is where you belong. I have often been puzzled to know how to account for some of the strange traits of your peculiar personality. You have hit the nail

now squarely on the head. You have been born one hundred and forty years too late. You are a rare old antique."

The boys laughed as Grant arose from his seat and lifting his diminutive friend bodily from the chair in which he was seated, he dropped him over the rail.

"When you grow up," he called, "and learn to behave you may come back here."

"I'm not coming back," called Fred glibly.

"We'll try to live through our disappointment," said Grant.

"You'll be disappointed all right the next time you see me," called Fred. Then turning to John he eagerly beckoned to him to follow him.

With a groan John slowly arose from the chair in which he was seated and followed Fred as he led the way around the corner of the house.

"What I want of you," said Fred when he and his companion could not be seen by the other boys, "is to go with me over to the Meeker House. I think I have found something."

"Is it the same thing you found last night?" inquired John.

"Not at all. I don't mind telling you that I have fixed a trap over there."

"What do you mean, a steel trap?"

"No, no," said Fred. "I sprinkled some bran last night all around the floor. I filled my pockets

with it before we started and while we were in the old house I scattered it on the floors. Now, I want to go over there to find out if —"

"If what?" interrupted John. "Are you trying to feed those spooks on bran?"

"As usual, my friend," retorted Fred, "you begin at the wrong end. I am not trying to get an impression of their heads, but of their feet. Only, spooks don't make a deep impression when they step on the floor, and I'm more than suspicious that I'll find some tracks."

"I'll go with you," said John eagerly. "Wait until I tell the other fellows that we are going away for a while. Are you going to walk, Fred?"

"Yes, I am. I have been riding all day and I want to stretch my muscles."

Both George and Grant laughed when John told them that he and Fred were going for a walk.

"You'll walk in one direction," called George, "but you'll be running when you come back. I think I'll take the car and in a half an hour I'll come over after you. You'll want to see some of your friends by that time and you will want to see them bad."

"I don't want to see them 'bad,' " retorted John as he turned away. "They are 'bad' enough as it is. I want to see them badly."

Together the two boys walked through the woods and across the lots and by a shorter route

than the highway arrived within a half-hour in the yard of the house they were seeking.

"Come around to the kitchen," said Fred. Almost unconsciously he had lowered his voice and although it was still daylight he was glancing nervously about him when he and John softly opened the rear door and stepped within the kitchen.

The boards of the floor were twisted and uneven. The floor was of pine and George had explained that his father had said that he believed the floor was as old as any part of the house. There were marks of the places where the women of another generation had scrubbed the floor. Doubtless it had been their pride to keep the pine boards clean, just as it is a source of pride to many of their sisters of a later day to be adorned with feathers of various gaudy colors.

Noiselessly the boys advanced and without a word having been spoken began to examine the floor where Fred had scattered the bran the preceding evening. No footprints were found, however, and it was speedily plain that if any one had entered the building since the boys had departed they had not done so by the kitchen door.

Convinced that they were alone in the house, the courage of both boys somewhat revived. Indeed there was something in the sunshine of the summer afternoon and in the not unmusical sounds

of the winged grasshoppers in the adjacent orchard that was soothing to the excited boys.

They were about to pass out of the room when John abruptly stopped and whispered, "Look here, Fred. What's that?" As he spoke he pointed to a small tube which plainly had been fastened recently to the wall. The tube was of tin, about an inch in diameter and extended almost to the ceiling. Through the wall a hole had been made and the boys peered eagerly at the wall in the adjacent room to see whether or not the tube was there also.

"That's just how it is! That's good, String!" exclaimed Fred excitedly. "That explains the sound of the voices we heard the other night."

"I don't see how it explains it," said John, somewhat puzzled by the excitement of his companion.

"Why, it's a speaking tube. You go back to the kitchen and I'll stay here and we'll try it."

The suggestion was quickly adopted and in a brief time both boys were aware that Fred's conjecture was correct. The strange sounds and the whispers of their names which had been heard frequently whenever they had visited the house after darkness had fallen, now were explained.

"That's the reason," said John eagerly, "why George always wants to come around to the kitchen

door. Don't you remember he hasn't once come in by the front door?"

"That's right," responded Fred. "He knows more about what is going on in this old house than he has let on, and all the time he has been pretending that he was puzzled as much as we are by what we have seen and heard. We must think up something so that we can pay him back in his own coin."

"That's what we'll do," said John eagerly. "What shall it be?"

"Time enough to think about that later," responded Fred. "What's that?" he added abruptly.

From within the chimney could be heard the sound as of a man swinging a noisy rattle. There were also sharp noises that sometimes were quite loud and at others were low and soft and yet they were continuously sounding.

"I tell you there's something in that chimney," said John.

"I begin to think you're right," whispered Fred. "Get down on your knees and look up through the fireplace."

John obediently stretched his long form upon the floor and peered up through the flue of the open fireplace. As he did so the clatter in the chimney suddenly increased in volume and for a moment

John was on the point of hastily withdrawing from the spot.

As he prepared to do so, however, suddenly a little, young bird fell, striking the floor close to John's head. At the same time there was a renewal of the clatter in the chimney and John hastily withdrew.

To his amazement he found when he arose that Fred was laughing.

"What's there so funny about it?" demanded John as he tried to brush the accumulated dust from his person.

For a moment Fred was almost unable to control himself, but at last he said, "Oh, Jack, what fools we have been. There we were so scared by the sound of the wings that we heard in this room and the strange noises that came from the chimney that we couldn't get out of the place fast enough. And now it's all as plain as daylight."

"I don't see it," said John blankly.

"Well, have a little patience, and in time you'll see it, Johnny."

"Why don't you talk? Why don't you explain yourself? What are you laughing at?" demanded John, irritated by the manner of his companion.

"Why those sounds we heard were made by chimney-swallows."

"What is a chimney-swallow?"

"Do you mean to tell me that you have lived to

be seventeen years old and don't know what a chimney-swallow is?"

"They don't have them in the city where I live."

"Well," said Fred, pretending to be discouraged, "I cannot understand how any fellow can live as you have and yet not know that there are some birds called chimney-swallows that live in the chimneys of old or deserted houses. If you should look up there now you could see some nests fastened right to the sides of the chimney. I have never seen the birds, but I'm sure that's what they are. Whenever we have come into the house we have probably frightened them and they have been flying around the room. They were the spooks that scared us so."

"Do you suppose George knew about it?" demanded John ruefully.

"Of course he knew it. He has been saving it all up to add to his story of the speaking tube."

"Well, it's a comfort to know the old house isn't haunted anyway."

"Of course it isn't haunted. There isn't anything haunted because there isn't anything like ghosts or spooks."

"I'm glad to hear you talk so nicely, Freddie," said John, who now had recovered from his chagrin. "If I'm not mistaken I've heard you talk in a different tone once or twice before when we have been here."

"That's all right," said Fred glibly. "Now we have found out what the spooks are and we'll show George that we're not afraid of anything in the old Meeker House."

The boys were still conversing in whispers, and as Fred made his bold declaration he abruptly stopped and looked anxiously toward the stairway. A sound mysterious and unexpected had been heard in the room directly above them. Both boys were convinced that either others were in the house, or that they had not yet found an explanation for all the mysteries of the old Meeker House.

CHAPTER XXII

A DARE

WITHOUT a word having been spoken, Fred and John instantly departed from the old house. They did not even glance at each other as they did so, but moved by a common impulse both were apparently ready to seek a place of safety with all haste.

Fred's bold declaration that now he had found an explanation for the strange occurrences in the Meeker House apparently had not held good. He was maintaining his place by the side of his tall friend when both were fleeing from the house.

The sun already had disappeared from sight and the shadows of the evening were lengthening.

Perhaps the hour increased their feeling of uncertainty. At all events the confidence they had possessed, when in broad daylight they had boldly entered the kitchen, manifestly now was gone. Each boy frequently glanced behind him in his flight, but neither spoke to the other until fifty yards intervened between them and the dwelling.

"What are we doing out here?" demanded Fred blankly.

"I don't think you need very much of an explanation," retorted John.

"That's the way it seems to me, too," responded Fred, striving to laugh lightly as he spoke.

"At all events we are making pretty good time."

Indeed the smaller boy was able to maintain the pace at which his friend with the longer legs was moving over the field. Half the distance between the house and the road had been covered when John stopped and said, "Look ahead there, Fred. Isn't that George and Grant waiting over yonder in the road?"

In response to the suggestion of his friend, Fred glanced quickly at the huge spreading oak tree that grew close to the fence. It was a magnificent tree, the pride of the country around about and the delight of many visitors. Beneath it an automobile was seen and then Fred exclaimed quickly, "You're right, String, that's George and Grant. Let's slow up a little. We don't want them to think we are in too much of a hurry."

Accordingly the speed at which they were moving decreased and as they glanced behind them and saw that the conditions about the old Meeker House apparently were unchanged the boys ceased to run and began to walk.

"Don't let them think we have been scared out," again suggested Fred. "We'll never hear the last of it if we don't."

Without replying John nodded his head and more slowly the boys walked across the intervening field and then climbed the fence and leaped lightly into the roadside when they drew near the place where the two boys were awaiting their coming.

"What's your hurry?" demanded George, laughing as he spoke.

"We're in no hurry," responded Fred glibly.

"We're hungry, that's all," said John. "We were afraid you would be keeping dinner for us."

"That's a mighty good excuse," laughed Grant. "You didn't act when we first saw you as if you were thinking of your dinner. I didn't believe that either one of you could make such good time."

"That's all right," said Fred sharply. "That's all right, but it's just exactly as I said."

"What is?" inquired George.

"Why the tricks you have been trying to play on us in the old Meeker House."

"Tricks? What tricks have I been trying to play?" replied George.

"Did you ever hear of chimney-swallows?" inquired Fred.

"Indeed I have," said George, "and I have seen them lots of times."

"Ever see any in the old Meeker House?"

"Yes," replied George, laughing again as he spoke.

"Well, why didn't you tell us that they were there? You let us go on and I think you helped us too to believe that the room was full of flying spooks."

"I didn't know that I was to blame," laughed George, "if you didn't know the difference between a spook and chimney-swallow."

"You must have put in a lot of work in that old house, George," broke in John.

"Work?" inquired George, staring blankly at his friend. "What do you mean? I never worked there in my life."

"Who put in that speaking tube that runs from the kitchen to the front room?" demanded John.

"I didn't," George said quietly.

"You mean you didn't do the work. I guess you knew it was put in and I guess too that you know who put it in."

George laughed, but did not directly reply to the implied question.

"We have found out about your old speaking tube," continued John. "That was a great trick for you to play on your old friends."

Grant, who was listening intently to the conversation, in which up to this time he had taken no part, now said, "Then you two fellows think you

have found out all about the strange things in the old Meeker House, do you?"

"We didn't say that," replied Fred. "All we say is that we have found out about the wings that we heard and the chattering in the chimney and the speaking tube that ran from the kitchen into the front room. My, but I was scared when I heard my name called there," he added.

George laughed loudly as he said, "You don't need to tell me that, Pyg. I wouldn't have believed that any living creature could have made its legs fly as fast as yours did that night."

"I was trying to keep up with the rest of the fellows," retorted Fred. "I had to go some to do that."

"Now that you have found out all these things you're not afraid to go back there any time, are you?" inquired George.

"Yes, sir, I am," said Fred.

"What?"

"Because we haven't found out everything. There's something strange about that place that I don't understand yet."

"Why, what happened?" inquired George quickly.

"We heard voices upstairs."

"Was that the reason why you were moving so fast across the yard?" laughed George.

"Laugh all you want to," said Fred, "but that's what we heard."

"Probably your tramp was talking to himself," suggested Grant.

"No, sir," spoke up John promptly. "That wasn't it at all. Besides there was more than one voice."

"You didn't hear the automobile-horn, did you?" inquired George.

"No, we didn't. We heard all I wanted to without hearing that. It just made my flesh creep to hear those voices upstairs and coming down the stairway."

"Was there anything strange about the voices?" asked George.

"Yes, sir, there was."

"Well, I tell you what I'll do," said Grant promptly. "I'll dare both of you to come back here to the old Meeker House after dinner tonight."

"I'll do it," said Fred promptly.

"I'll give you another dare better than that," said John. "I'll dare you and George to go back there right now."

"Will you come too?" demanded George.

"We have just come from there," said John. "We know what there is there and you don't. Now we dare you both to go back right now."

George glanced a moment questioningly at

Grant and then without a word being spoken promptly turned the car and started back toward the mysterious old house.

Apparently all thoughts of dinner had been forgotten or ignored. Fred and John looked at each other and laughed derisively, but neither spoke until at last the car was halted under the old oak tree.

Quickly George and Grant leaped out and started across the intervening field.

Fred and John left to themselves waited until their friends had gone to the rear of the building and then the former said quickly, "Let's take the car and go back home. It will serve those fellows just right to leave them there."

John laughed as he agreed to the suggestion.

Avoiding all possible noise they turned the car about and started down the road. They had gone only a short distance, however, before Fred suddenly clutched the arm of his companion who was driving and said, "Listen, String! Wasn't that a call or a shout?"

As he spoke, Fred in great excitement looked behind him in the direction of the mysterious old dwelling house. Without a word, John turned the car about and started swiftly on his way back to the old tree.

CHAPTER XXIII

LED BY A MAN

WHEN the boys arrived at the familiar place in the road they were startled by a renewal of the shouts from the house. It was the faint sound of these calls which had alarmed them and caused them to turn back on their way.

Even while they were hesitating as to whether or not they should leave the car and run to the house to aid their friends, who apparently were in dire trouble, they saw two forms emerge from the front door. They instantly recognized George and Grant, for the light was still sufficient to enable them to see quite plainly across the fields. Both boys were running at their highest speed.

Blowing the horn of the automobile and shouting, both John and Fred did their utmost to call the attention of their friends to the fact that they were awaiting their coming. That their calls were heard was speedily manifest when both George and Grant, turning slightly in the direction in which they were speeding, ran toward the great tree.

At that moment George stumbled over some unseen object and fell headlong upon the ground. His companion stopped a moment and Fred and John watched him as he lifted George to his feet and then both boys renewed their flight.

In a brief time they had arrived at the fence and in their haste both fell when they tried to climb over it.

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" demanded Fred excitedly, as his friends approached the car.

"Never mind what's wrong," said George brusquely. "Let me get into the car and give me that wheel."

No further words were spoken while George and his companions entered the car and in a brief time the automobile was again speeding down the road. Several times Grant glanced apprehensively behind him, but the increasing distance evidently gave him renewed courage, for when a quarter of a mile had been covered he said, "I suppose you fellows are both wondering what the trouble is."

"Yes, we are," said John quickly. "What is it?"

"It's the same thing that scared you, only worse. We heard sounds upstairs that showed that some men up there were fighting, then there was a pistol-shot and we heard some one fall. After that there

were groans and cries galore, and we thought it was time for us to start for home."

"You were brave boys to leave that other fellow!" said Fred tartly. "If there was some one shot, it was time for you to help him."

"We couldn't help him very much if we went upstairs only to be shot ourselves," said George sharply.

"You don't know what you could have done," retorted Fred.

"No, I didn't know, but I'll tell you what I'll do. If you want to go back there right now, I'll take you back."

"I don't want to go," said Fred quietly. "It's time for somebody besides boys like us to step in. I think the best thing for us to do will be to find some man and take him back there. We can go in with him then and help if we have to."

"I guess that's a good suggestion, all right," said George quickly. "Grant and I were so scared that we couldn't think of anything except getting out of the horrible old house in the best possible time. My, think how Grant loped along, taking about six feet at a jump."

"I noticed that I wasn't alone," said Grant, dryly. "Whoever it was with me wasn't very far behind."

"I guess you're right," acknowledged George. "Now I'll own up, fellows, about the speaking

tube and the swallows. I knew the birds were in the chimney and I knew too that you didn't know much about such things, so I thought I would let you work it out. Then I put in that speaking tube and added to the fun, but I tell you right now that I have had my lesson. I'm not afraid of all the ghosts in Jersey, but I don't like the sounds that came from that upper room in the old Meeker House. I don't mind saying so to any one. I guess my father is at the house by this time, for he said he might come out to-night. If he is, we'll tell him all about it and let him take charge. It's time for the Go Ahead boys to go ahead all right, but I think they had better follow somebody who is older, all the same."

All the boys agreed that George's suggestion was the best that could be made. The speed of the automobile increased and not many minutes had elapsed when the Go Ahead boys arrived at George's home.

They were all delighted when they found that Mr. Sanders was there. He listened to the story of the excited boys and then quietly said, "I think we'll have dinner first and then I'll go with you over to the old Meeker House. You have been stirring up the spooks, have you?" and Mr. Sanders laughed as he spoke. "There were spooks there when I was a boy, and I remember how we used to steer clear of the corner when we were

coming home evenings. When we were a little older we began to make investigations and found there wasn't anything unusual or that couldn't be explained about the old place. But the stories of the spooks have kept up just the same. I don't know why, unless it is that there are some people that believe such things just because they want to believe them."

"That's what Cæsar says," spoke up Grant. "I remember in his Commentaries he wrote that 'men believe that which they wish to believe.' But, Mr. Sanders, don't you think there's something very strange about what George and I heard there to-night?"

"There may be," admitted Mr. Sanders, "but there have been so many stories told about the old house that I do not know whether you boys thought you heard something or really did hear it."

"You would have known if you had been with us," spoke up George quickly.

"Well, I shall be with you soon and then we will try to find out. I cannot believe there is anything wrong there, so we might as well have our dinner and then we will start."

The plan of Mr. Sanders was followed, and directly after dinner the Go Ahead boys, together with George's father, started once more for the place which had been the scene of so much excitement throughout their summer vacation.

Upon the suggestion of Mr. Sanders a lantern was taken with them. When they arrived at the familiar spot beneath the old oak tree the lantern was lighted and all five started across the fields toward the Meeker House.

No one spoke until they arrived at the front door, which now had become a familiar spot to all four boys. Without a word Mr. Sanders pushed open the door and stepped within the room. Instantly there was a great fluttering of wings, for the chimney-swallows, startled by the light as well as by the unexpected entrance of the visitors, were displaying their alarm by their frantic cries and swift flight. No other sounds, however, were heard when the birds at last became more quiet.

"Where did you say the trouble was?" inquired Mr. Sanders.

"In the room upstairs," answered George.

"The one directly over this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then the only thing for us to do is to go up there and see what has happened."

The boys agreed to the suggestion and although no one spoke every one was aware that his companions were as excited as he when slowly they began to mount the rickety stairway. The boards creaked and groaned beneath their feet, increasing the excitement of all.

When they had arrived at the platform about

midway on the stairway, all stopped and listened. The screeching sounds of the excited birds still continued, but otherwise the silence was unbroken.

"Is there anybody here?" called Mr. Sanders loudly. As no reply was made to his inquiry he turned to the boys and said, "There doesn't appear to be anybody here. We'll go on up and continue our investigations."

Once more leading the way, Mr. Sanders noiselessly mounted the steps, the boys keeping closely together and not far behind the leader. Holding his lantern before him Mr. Sanders stopped when he arrived at the head of the stairway and examined the rooms that opened before him.

Suddenly a sound very like laughter was heard in the old building, but it quickly ceased and in place of it the faint tooting of an automobile horn was heard.

The boys now were staring about them and had it not been for the presence of George's father it is doubtful if any one would have remained.

As it was, a startling event occurred which instantly cause all five to turn quickly about and run swiftly down the stairway.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE END OF THE HOUSE

EVEN Mr. Sanders appeared to be as alarmed as his younger companions. At all events he was swiftly leading the way, and as the boys were running down the stairway two or three steps at a time it was necessary for him to move rapidly in order to keep his place at the head of the line.

There had been a sudden flash of light that apparently had filled the building. No sound had accompanied the strange sight although the air was heavy with the suffocating odor of burning powder. The light apparently had been flashed in every room at the same moment. The twittering of the chimney-swallows abruptly ceased after one shrill outburst of alarm.

Before the party arrived at the foot of the stairway the blinding flash was repeated. The house now seemed to be filled with the penetrating odor and even the lantern did not fully serve to light their way.

"Keep together, boys," called Mr. Sanders in a low voice. "We must all make for the front

door and get out of this place as soon as possible."

In spite of their alarm, Fred in his own mind was questioning whether it was the heavy odor in the room or the desire of Mr. Sanders to gain a place of safety outside the building that had caused such a precipitate flight. At all events no one delayed, and in a brief time all five were running rapidly across the field, Mr. Sanders still holding the lantern and leading the retreating party.

Before they arrived at the road, however, they stopped and looked behind them. The old house now was wrapped in darkness. Not a sound came from the mysterious dwelling. The blinding flashes of light that had been seen apparently were ended and only the reflection of the moonlight from the few windows that still were left in the house produced an unusual sight.

In silence the Go Ahead boys and Mr. Sanders waited for a repetition of the sight which had startled them. Not a sound came from the place, and although the boys waited several minutes the strange lights were not repeated.

"I'm inclined to think," said Mr. Sanders thoughtfully, "that it will be better for us to go back and continue our investigations. What do you say, boys?"

"We agree," spoke up Fred glibly. "We might as well run this matter down now as at any time.

What do you think those flashes were, Mr. Sanders?"

"From the odor I think likely they were made by setting off the powder which is lighted when a flashlight picture is taken."

"It does seem so, doesn't it?" said John quickly. "But where did such powder come from? Who lighted it?"

"That's what we must find out," said Mr. Sanders dryly.

Meanwhile the party was returning to the building and had covered half the distance when they all stopped abruptly as George exclaimed, "There's a light there now! Can't you see it? It's up in the corner of the eaves."

A moment later all declared that they could see the flames to which George had referred, but as they resumed their walk John said abruptly, "That's more than a flash-light, that's a fire! I tell you, fellows, the old Meeker House is on fire!"

Instantly every one stopped but only a brief delay was required to confirm the startling statement. The flames by this time had burst through the roof and it was evident that unless help speedily was obtained the house which had stood nearly two centuries was doomed.

There was no further waiting now and quickly all five were running toward the blazing building. This time, however, Mr. Sanders was not leading

the party. The boys speedily outdistanced him and as soon as they arrived within the yard they discovered that two other men were already on the ground.

By this time the fire was under strong headway. The timbers of the dwelling house, old and dry, were burning almost like tinder. Sparks were flying from the blazing roof and the flames were steadily mounting higher and higher.

Across the field from the opposite road forms of men approaching the building could be seen, and the wild cry "Fire!" "Fire!" was heard on every side.

There were no buckets or pails to be found in the dwelling, as was speedily discovered when the doors were burst open. Near the kitchen door was the old well, which had been used in former generations. A well-sweep was there, but the heavy weight which had been used to balance the bucket was gone and it had been long since the water in the depths below had been disturbed. In desperation, however, the entire party sought to find some means of stopping the fire.

Some of the men who now had arrived started swiftly across the fields toward houses that could be seen in the distance. There was a vague thought that they might obtain pails and ropes that would enable them to quench the flames. By

the time the men returned, however, the house was doomed.

Fascinated by the sight, the boys withdrew from the spot and watched the blazing dwelling as the flames leaped and roared and crackled.

"There goes the chimney!" exclaimed Fred in a low voice, as a pile of bricks fell crashing into the depths.

"I wonder what became of those chimney-swallows," suggested John.

"I guess those that could fly are gone and those that were too young to fly are already burned," said Grant.

"How do you suppose that fire started?" inquired George.

As no one had a ready solution his question remained unanswered. The boys now, however, were rejoined by Mr. Sanders, who explained that it was perilous as well as useless to attempt to fight the flames longer. The most that could be expected was to prevent the flying embers from setting fire to fences or to buildings that were not far away.

"It's a pity," said Mr. Sanders slowly, "that the old house had to go in this way."

"And it never gave up all its secrets either," added Fred. "We were just on the point of finding out, when the whole thing goes up in smoke."

"I fancy that what you call 'secrets' will all be explained. My thought is that the two men, whom we found here when we came back across the fields, can tell more about the origin of the fire than we think."

"Who were the men?" inquired George.

"I don't know either of them," answered Mr. Sanders. "To me they looked like tramps."

Startled by the unexpected statement the boys stared blankly at one another and then as if moved by a common impulse they turned and advanced among the spectators who now numbered at least three score.

"Isn't it wonderful," suggested Grant, "what a crowd you can get and in such a little while even out in the country, if anything unusual is going on? I wouldn't have believed that a blast on Gabriel's trumpet could have brought twenty people here in an hour and yet in less than twenty minutes there's a crowd. Where do you suppose they came from?"

"That fire can be seen a long distance," explained George, "and there's nothing like a fire to get a crowd. There's the tramp!" he abruptly added, nodding, as he spoke, toward a man who could be seen on the outskirts of the assembly.

By common consent all four boys instantly ran to the place where the man was seen.

As they approached, however, the tramp, for

George's statement proved to be correct, apparently became aware of their coming and instantly departed.

To the boys it seemed that he had moved around to the other side of the burning building but when they sought him there he was not to be found.

"What do you suppose it all means?" inquired John blankly. "He acted as if he didn't want to see us."

"Probably he didn't," suggested George. "That's his right."

"It may be and it may not be," retorted John. "I don't believe he will stand very long on the order of his departure."

"Why not?"

"Probably he could tell more about how the fire started than any one in the crowd."

"What do you mean?" demanded George as the three boys stopped and stared into the face of their friend.

"I don't know just how much I do mean, but we all know that the tramp used the old Meeker House as a sort of headquarters, or at least that he used to stop there nights, and it may be that he was here when the fire first started."

"Of course he was," spoke up John. "Don't you remember that he told me that if we would come over to the house after dinner, we would see something interesting?"

"Well, all I can say is that we came and that we certainly found something interesting," said George dryly, as the falling timbers crashed into the fire and great showers of sparks fell all about the waiting boys.

CHAPTER XXV

A TALK WITH THE TRAMP

FOLLOWING the fall of the walls of the old house, the fire blazed up anew and a fresh shower of sparks fell far from the blazing building. The crowd was helpless. The only water to be had was from the old well which now had caved in and the small amount which could be secured had been exhausted in the early part of the fire. The timbers were old and dry, and blazed almost like burning paper. The faces and forms of the spectators seemed to be ghostly in the light against the dark background of the night.

For an hour the blaze still continued, but the flames were gradually becoming lower. No longer were there showers of blazing sparks that fell upon the ground far away.

There was only a dim glow when at last Mr. Sanders led the way back to the automobile. The excitement of the boys, however, still continued and when their car started they were all looking back at the spot where the crowd, fantastic in its appearance in the dim light and the glow of the dying fire, were still to be seen.

"Well, there's one thing I feel almost as badly about as I do the loss of the old building," said John thoughtfully, as the car sped homeward.

"What is that?" inquired George.

"Now we shall never know about the mysteries of the old place."

"There aren't very many mysteries left," suggested Fred. "We have found out about the speaking tube and the chimney-swallows."

"Yes," said Grant, "but how about that blaze?"

"I suspect," joined in Mr. Sanders, "that the blaze you speak of had something to do with the burning of the old house."

"What do you mean?" inquired George quickly.

"That's just what I mean," replied Mr. Sanders. "Somebody had a flash-light over there and probably set fire to the building. I haven't any idea who could have done it."

"I guess the tramp might tell us something," suggested Grant.

"The tramp?" inquired Mr. Sanders. "What tramp?"

In response to his questions the boys related all their experiences with the strange man whom they had found in the old Meeker House. The part which he had taken in the return of the lost automobile was also explained and in response to George's suggestion that his father should reward

the man for the return of the car his father quickly inquired, "But what was he doing away up beyond Tuxedo? I thought you said he made his headquarters here in the old Meeker House."

"He does, part of the time," explained John.

"But what was he doing up there so far away?" inquired Mr. Sanders sharply. "You know I sent you word that there was a possibility that a car which had been located in a garage at Newburgh might be the one which we had lost. What was he doing up there? How did he travel so far and so fast?"

"He explained to us," said John, "that he had got a ride most of the way. In fact I think he said that he didn't have to walk over half a mile. He stole a ride on the cars and then somebody took him in his automobile and brought him farther."

"Did he say what he was doing up there?" inquired Mr. Sanders.

"No, sir," replied George.

"But you say he was a very skillful driver?"

"Yes, sir," spoke up John promptly. "I never saw a man that could handle a car better."

"I think we must look into this more fully," said Mr. Sanders, "but it may be that he is the one who may know more about the loss of our car than we think and I'm sure he could explain a part at least of the origin of the fire at the old Meeker House."

"Do you think he set it on fire?" demanded Fred.

"Probably not, at least intentionally," replied Mr. Sanders, "but it may be that he was the one who had the flash-light and he may have set fire to the old building without intending to do so."

"Well," spoke up John, "I'm sorry we shan't ever find out about that tooting of the automobile horn that we heard in the old building and the flash that we saw. Why, the fire seemed to be all over the building at once and then die out in every room just as quickly as it came."

"I think we shall know more about it," said Mr. Sanders quietly. "Meanwhile the best thing for us to do is not to do anything to-night."

After the arrival of the boys at George's home the excitement still continued and for two hours the boys remained on the piazza talking over the experiences of the night. Much of the mystery of the old house was still unexplained.

"Well, all I can say is," declared Fred, as the boys at last arose to go to their rooms, "that if the old cowboys and skinners came back to the old Meeker House to carry on their pranks they'll have to seek other quarters now."

"I think you will find that your cowboys and skinners are pretty well up to date," laughed Mr. Sanders. "And you'll find too that they are clothed in very substantial flesh. I have been sus-

picious for a long time that the tramps were using the old house for a sort of headquarters, but I was not sure of it until you told me the story of the man with whom you had had some dealings. We'll all go over there the first thing to-morrow morning and perhaps we shall find some things that will help us to make the others clear."

Accordingly, soon after breakfast the following day, the four Go Ahead boys, together with Mr. Sanders, departed for the place where the fire had occurred the preceding evening.

When they arrived, smoke was still rising from the ashes, but the flames had long since died away. No one was near the spot and as the boys approached the ruins, Mr. Sanders said, "I wish our friend, the tramp, would come."

"Why do you want him?" inquired George.

"I think he is the man who can give us the information we most want just now. I do not recall that I ever saw him."

"He's a strange man," said George quickly. "He looks like a tramp and yet he uses good English and he shows that he has been used to better things some time in his life."

"Did he tell you that?" laughed Mr. Sanders.

"I don't know that he said that exactly, but that's what he made me think."

"Quite likely."

"Well, it's true," maintained George stoutly.

"All you have to do is to look into his face and hear him talk and you know that he isn't just a common tramp."

"Strange how the mysteries about the old Meeker House keep up," laughed Mr. Sanders. "First you have the cowboys and skinners meeting there and then you have men who may be modern cowboys and skinners in flesh and blood who make it their headquarters. The twittering of the chimney-swallows drives all four of the Go Ahead boys out of the building."

"But we went back," spoke up Fred quickly. "We didn't give up. Besides, Mr. Sanders, I noticed last night when we came down the stairway that all four of us had all we could do to keep up with you."

"So you did. So you did," admitted Mr. Sanders laughingly. "But I did not run because I was afraid of spooks."

"Neither did we," said Fred. "We thought when we had a man along with us that we would be protected and everything would be safe. But when we saw him leaving the old Meeker House, faster than any of us boys could go, we thought our safest plan was to try to keep up with him. Something might happen to him, you know. If he was in trouble he might need our help."

Mr. Sanders laughed heartily at Fred's asser-

tions and then said quickly, "Who is that man coming across the field?"

All the boys looked quickly in the direction in which Mr. Sanders pointed and a moment later George said in a low voice, "That's our tramp."

"I thought he would be here," said Mr. Sanders. "Now perhaps we can find out a little more than we knew before."

All five awaited the approach of the man who indeed proved to be the one about whom they had been talking.

As the tramp came near, his face lighted up with a smile as he cordially said, "Good morning. Good morning. You're early on the scene of our disaster last night."

"Yes," responded George. "We saw you last night and then we lost sight of you in the crowd and couldn't find you again."

"Well, here I am," said the tramp, smiling. "If you still want to see me all you have to do is to look at me. I never thought before that I was very much to look at."

"We want to talk to you," said Mr. Sanders more seriously. "You told the boys, did you not, that you and your friends had been making the old house your headquarters?"

"Not exactly 'headquarters,'" replied the tramp. "We used to stay some nights there."

"And you used the ghosts to scare people off or keep them away from the old house?"

"That's what we did," admitted the tramp, laughing loudly as he spoke. "It would do your heart good if you could only have seen some of them leave."

"What were those groans that we heard?" spoke up Fred. "I never quite understood them. We found out about the birds in the chimney and the speaking tube that ran from the kitchen to the front room, but how about those groans?"

"Why, there were usually two or three of us, and when we had visitors we took our stand in different rooms and one answered the groan of the others. Sometimes we groaned all together. Usually, though, we did not have very much to do, because after one or two groans we usually found the old house deserted."

"What about that automobile horn?" inquired George.

"Oh, that was another way we had of scaring people, that was all."

"Where did you get the horn?" inquired Mr. Sanders.

"I can't just say. We had it a long time."

"It sounded, the boys tell me, very like the horn of the car that we had taken from our garage."

The tramp looked into the face of Mr. Sanders a moment before he said, "And you suspect, do

you, that I took your car and left the horn here?"

"Do you know where our car is?" inquired Mr. Sanders abruptly. "I told my son to give you ten dollars for returning the old car. Here is the money," Mr. Sanders added, as he held forth a bill.

"Thank you, sir," said the tramp, as he took the money and thrust it into his pocket. "I told the boys that I could be persuaded to accept the reward; but about your other car, all I can say is that I don't know where it is now."

"Do you know who took it?"

"I do not."

"Do you know how the fire started in the old house last night?"

"No, sir. I don't."

"But you had some flash-light powder and you set it off here. The house may have caught fire from it."

"I don't think it could possibly have got on fire that way. You see we used that powder in pans and we set it off in two or three rooms at the same time, just as we used to answer one another's cries or groan together. The fire couldn't spread. The powder just flashed up and then the fire was all out in a minute. Besides, the old house was no good anyway. No one could live in it and my friends and I thought that if we slept there occasionally no one would be any the worse for it.

Of course if there had been any objections made we should have been glad to pay attention to them."

"I wish you would come back to the car with me, I want to speak to you alone."

"All right, sir, just as you say," responded the tramp, quickly advancing and accompanying Mr. Sanders as he led the way across the fields after he had bidden the boys remain where they then were.

CHAPTER XXVI

CONCLUSION

MR. SANDERS and the tramp remained in the car a long time. Indeed, as the minutes passed the boys became somewhat impatient. Frequently they glanced toward the scene in the road in which Mr. Sanders and his strange companion were evidently holding a very interesting conversation.

When an hour had elapsed the desire of the boys to depart became more pronounced. A few of the country people meanwhile had come to view the ruins of the famous old house, but they had little to say to the boys and after they had inspected the ruins the most of them slowly departed.

At last Fred said impatiently, "Look yonder! Mr. Sanders is taking that man away in the car."

"I wonder where he is going?" said George, as he glanced at the departing automobile.

"Probably taking him to the lock-up," suggested Fred.

"If he's taking the man to the lock-up I know some more that he ought not to forget," said George soberly.

"So do I," spoke up Fred, "and some of them aren't more than a thousand miles from here either."

However, after the departure of Mr. Sanders in the car, the boys became more thoughtful. They had not received any word to remain where they were, but George decided that it would not be wise for them to depart until they had received some further instructions. Doubtless, he explained, his father would return for them in a little while.

Another hour had elapsed before Mr. Sanders came back. As soon as he was discovered approaching, all the Go Ahead boys ran quickly across the field and when they were informed, in response to their inquiries, that Mr. Sanders was ready to take them home they all quickly climbed into the automobile.

"What did you do with the tramp?" inquired George as soon as the car started.

"I took him to the railroad station."

"Is he going to leave?"

"He says he is."

"You seemed to have had a mighty interesting conversation. Did he tell you all the sad, sweet story of his life?"

"I knew much of it."

"You did?" demanded George in astonishment. "You did? Who is he? What is he? How did

you know him? Where did he come from? What is his name?"

"Hold on," interrupted Mr. Sanders with a laugh. "I can answer your questions one at a time, but I cannot find any answer that might fit them all alike. Let me tell you first of all that he didn't explain everything as fully as I wish he had, but he did tell me a few things."

"What were they?" demanded George impatiently.

"Let me tell you first a little about himself," said Mr. Sanders, smiling at the interest of his young companions. "That tramp is the younger brother of a great friend of mine. Indeed, his brother and I were together almost all the time when we were boys. If I was not in his house then he was in mine, or we were fishing in these brooks or nutting in the woods or coasting on the hills. We very seldom were separated. This younger brother—"

"What is his name?" interrupted George.

"I shan't tell you his name now. Perhaps I will some other time, but he was one of the most attractive boys I ever knew. He was very quiet in his manner, and had the greatest faculty of making friends I ever knew any one to have. His mother almost idolized him and she never held him up to any task. If he got into mischief it was al-

ways the fault of the other boys, she said. If he was kept after school or had any trouble with the teachers she always told him that it was the teacher's fault. Whatever he did, to her was right. You boys want to be thankful that you have mothers that hold you up to some things instead of upholding you in everything you do.

"Well, this man when he was a boy was too lazy to have any share in the family life. Pleasant, good-natured, popular with the boys and girls, he never did anything for any one else. If his mother wanted a pail of water drawn from the old well behind the farmhouse—and they lived right straight across the field in that house over yonder," explained Mr. Sanders, pointing as he spoke to a house that could be seen in the distance, "he always had some excuse. If his mother had simply told him to bring in a pail of water instead of trying to smooth the way for him and said that he was too tired or not strong enough, if she had done that and some other things like it I don't believe this man to-day would be tramping around the country. He has been a complete failure. He has never learned to do anything well. He used to be the best baseball player we had in all this part of the country. There wasn't a fellow that could catch him when we were in swimming in the old pond. He could make a boat and sail a boat, but he just simply drifted on. By the way, boys, did

any of you ever stop to think of the fact that a boat never drifts but in one direction?''

''What's that?'' inquired John.

''Why, down the stream,'' replied Mr. Sanders quietly. ''This boy grew up to be a man and drifted into all kinds of bad ways. You see he had never learned to work and besides there are two words in the English language that he never could pronounce. One word has three letters in it and the other has two, but little words though they are, he never seemed to be able to pronounce them.''

''I can't think what the words are,'' said George.

''I know what they are,'' broke in John. ''They are 'yes' and 'no.' ''

''That's right,'' replied Mr. Sanders with a smile. ''They are the hardest words in the language for a good many people to use. When they say 'yes' they don't say it in a way that means much, and when they say 'no' it doesn't mean much more.

''His mother died years ago and I have always thought that this son was the cause of her death. At one time, as I told you, he was just as straight and attractive a boy as any of you.''

''I guess the trouble with him was that he wasn't a Go Ahead boy,'' suggested Fred.

''That was one trouble,'' replied Mr. Sanders with a smile, ''and another was that after he began to drift he couldn't stop. You see if he hadn't

begun he never could have come to the end to which he has. That's a strange thing to me that more people do not realize that if they don't begin, they never will come to the end."

"Did he explain to you," inquired Fred, "why he shut me in the cellar of the old Meeker House?"

"No," replied Mr. Sanders, "I didn't know that you were shut in there."

"Well, I was. He caught me in the cellar and bolted the door on me. I must have been in there an hour and a half."

"How did you get out? Did he let you out?"

"No, sir, I went and pushed up the outside door."

"Well, why did you wait an hour and a half before you did that?" responded Mr. Sanders with a laugh.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Fred blankly. "I guess it was because I didn't think of it or try it."

"Very likely he meant it for a joke. Now, when I had my talk with him he recognized me, although at first I didn't recognize him. He did say some things about scaring you boys away from the old place."

"Did he say anything about the way we left last night?" inquired George mischievously.

"Why, how did you leave last night?" inquired Mr. Sanders.

"We left in a big hurry," declared George.

"What made you in such a hurry?"

"We were trying to keep up with the man who was with us and was leading the way," said George demurely.

Mr. Sanders joined in the laugh that followed and then said quickly, "Our lost car will be brought back to-day."

"How do you know?" demanded George quickly.

"I don't think I shall explain all of that to you, my boy," said Mr. Sanders quietly. "It ought to be enough to know that it will be there."

"But suppose the tramp doesn't bring it back?" suggested Grant.

"I am not supposing anything about the tramp, or about any failure," replied Mr. Sanders, again smiling quietly. "All I say to you is that I am confident that the car will be brought back."

"Did you find out who stole the car?" inquired John.

"I don't think it was 'stolen.' You might call it 'borrowed.'"

"Well, did you find out who 'borrowed' it then?" demanded John.

"Yes."

"Who did?" said George eagerly.

"There are several reasons why I shall not go farther into details," said Mr. Sanders. "You

may draw such conclusions as you please. Very likely they will not be incorrect. You have followed the events of the summer more closely than I and I have no doubt can connect one with another."

"Well, I think," said George positively, "that the tramp took our car. He's a mighty good driver and knows all about a car. He didn't intend to sell it perhaps, but he wanted to use it for a few days."

"Are you sure he used it in the daytime?" inquired Mr. Sanders quietly.

"Why, yes. When would he use it?" demanded George.

"Let me suppose a case," explained his father. "Just suppose a man and his friends made it a practice to come to your garage nights and take out your car after you had gone to bed. Suppose on one of these long rides the car met with a bad accident. It was impossible to bring the car back that night, so it was taken to a garage where it was said that at least a week would be required to repair it. At the end of the week the car is not repaired. Naturally the people whose automobile is missing are sure the car has been stolen and they are sending word all over the country for the police to be on the lookout for it. Meanwhile the car is safe in a little town not more than

ten miles distant from the place where it belonged. Finally there comes a day when the car is ready, but the man who took it and who had the accident has not money enough to pay for the repairs. He doesn't intend to steal the car, but he is not able to bring it back to its owner. If the owner telephones to the garage for a man to bring it to his home it is quite likely he may see it soon."

"And did you let the tramp get away?"

"I not only let him get away, but I gave him money to leave. I don't suppose he will use the money as I told him, but I am going to give him a chance. I would rather help two men who do not deserve it than to let one go who does. Besides," Mr. Sanders added thoughtfully, "I thought of his father and mother and how good they had been to me when I was a boy. There," he added, "I have told you more than I expected."

"Will the tramp come back?" inquired Grant.

"I hope not. I doubt if he does, because the old Meeker House has now gone and he has no place hereabout in which he can stay."

"Well, we found out what the spooks in the old house were," said Fred. "I guess that's the way with most of such things."

"We certainly had a good time finding out," said John laughingly. "I'm glad we didn't give up."

"So am I," said Fred. "But then," he added, "we are the Go Ahead boys and have not learned how to do anything else."

THE END

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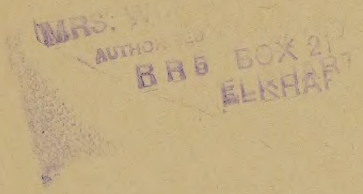

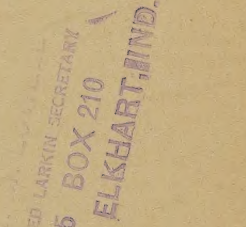

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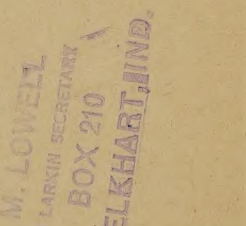

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